



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

THE
BLACK SPECK.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY"





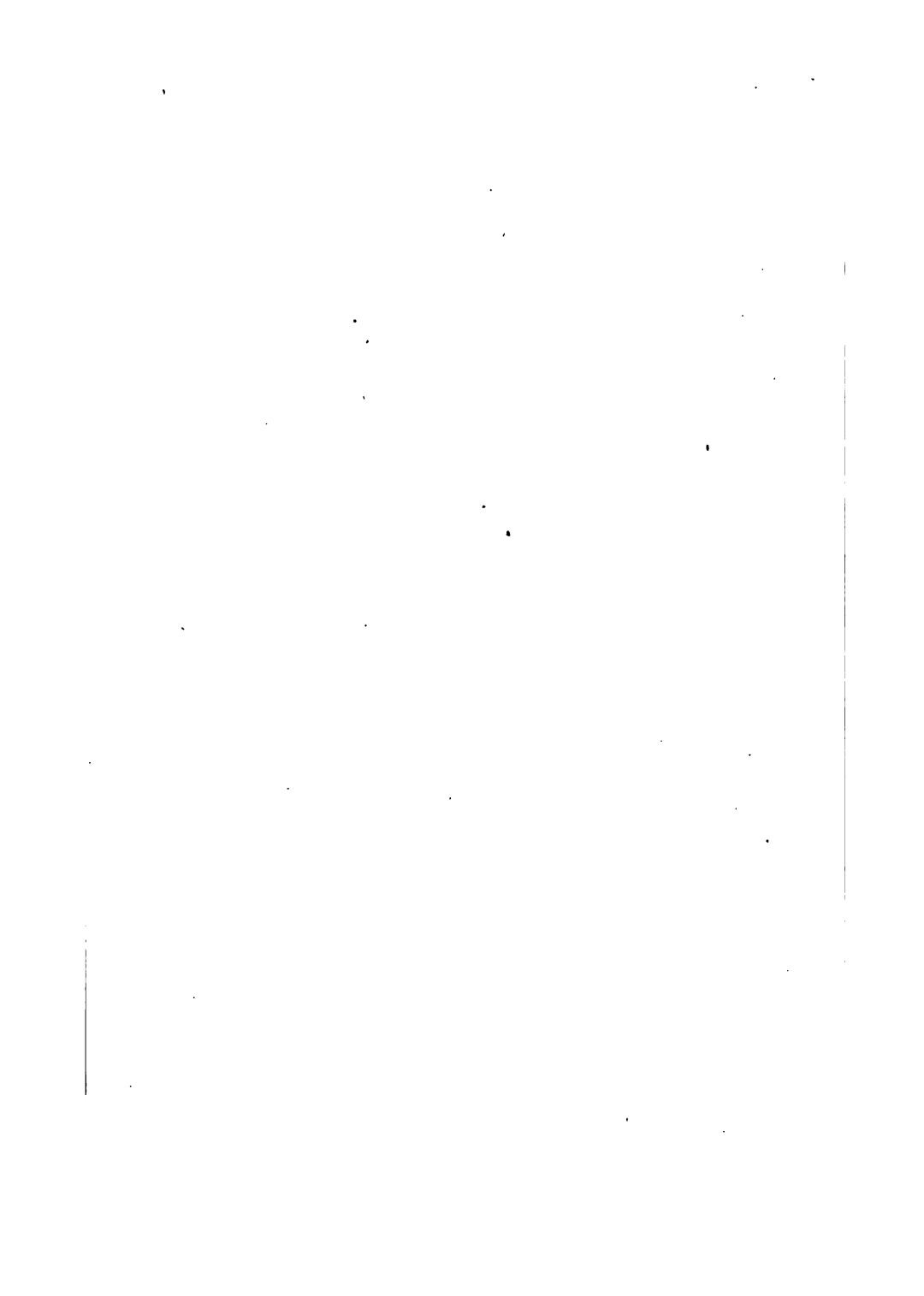
600058586







600058586



THE BLACK SPECK.



"WHAT, A SAILOR AND DON'T DRINK!"—See page 17.

THE BLACK SPECK.

A Temperance Tale.

BY

F. W. ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF "GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "NO CHURCH,"
"MATTIE, A STRAY," "POOR ZEPH,"
ETC. ETC.

"As the Arabs say, there is a black speck, were it no bigger than a bean's eye, in every soul ; which, once set it a-working, will overcloud the whole man into darkness and quasi-madness, and hurry him balefully into night."

THOMAS CARLYLE.



LONDON:

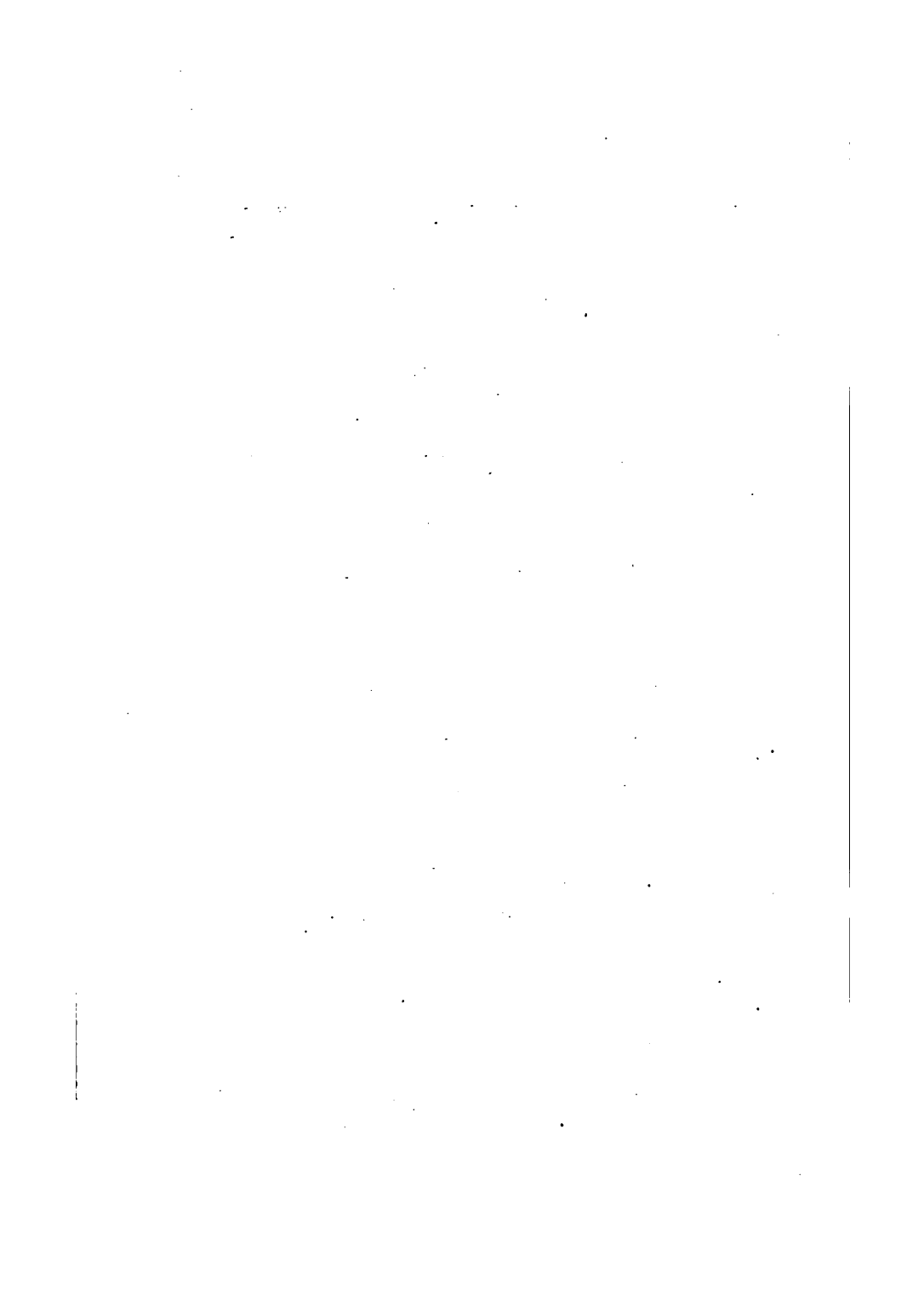
R. WILLOUGHBY,

27, IVY LANE, PATERNOSTER ROW.

1881.

[All rights reserved.]

251. 9 : 422.



CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. WAITING FOR THE MORAL	1
II. SHADWELL WAY	10
III. "DICK'S FLING"	19
IV. OUTSIDE "THE ROSY MORN"	25
V. DOWN IN DEVON	32
VI. THE BAD NEWS	37
VII. SISSIE ESTON MAKES UP HER MIND	44
VIII. A WOMAN WHO HAD HER OWN WAY	51
IX. THE INQUEST	63
X. SETTLING DOWN	68
XI. IN SEARCH OF ADVICE	74
XII. VICTOR'S ADVICE	81
XIII. JAMIE WOULD A WOON' GO	88
XIV. PERSUASION	98
XV. ALL JEM'S FAULT	104
XVI. THE DRINK	114
XVII. A STATE OF PROBATION	120
XVIII. THE CRUEL TRUTH	129

CHAP.	PAGE
XIX. THE CRISIS	134
XX. ONE STRUGGLE	145
XXI. THE OLD MYSTERY	157
XXII. DANGER SIGNALS	161
XXIII. THE DANGER ITSELF	170
XXIV. WAITING FOR THE MORROW	180
XXV. THE OLD SWEETHEARTS	183
XXVI. THE LUCKY MAN	190
XXVII. CONGRATULATIONS.	197
XXVIII. REPROACHES.	202
XXIX. HURRIED BALEFULLY INTO NIGHT	209

THE BLACK SPECK.

CHAPTER I.

WAITING FOR THE MORAL.

"THIS looks uncommon like home, Dick."

"Ay, ay, Jem ; and there's nothing like it, after all. Doesn't the poet say so—doesn't a man's heart ?"

"At times," was the doubtful answer. "But then there are all sorts of hearts, and," Jem added, with a little sigh, "all sorts of homes."

"You've been precious quiet about yours, Jem, and yet how I have raved about mine !"

"Yes, you *have* raved."

"Well, fancy it," said Dick, enthusiastically ; "a home on the slope of a hill, in dear old Devonshire ; roses clustering over the porch as big as summer cabbages ; roses in the front garden, a trifle bigger, Jem ; a loving sister standing at the gate, and watching down the sunlit road for me,

and presently clapping her hands and crying with joy at the sight of me, an old scape-grace who ran away to sea! Isn't that a fair picture to draw—isn't that worth coming back to England for?"

"You ought to have been a painter, Dick, not a sailor," cried Jem, with a hearty laugh at his companion's raptures, "though you do paint roses rather large."

"Are they not as large where your home is?" was the rejoinder.

"I can't say they are," answered Jem, and the face lost its smile so suddenly, that Dick ceased his badinage, and glanced askance at his companion.

The two men whose conversation opens the pages of our story were seamen of the *Rover*—an A 1 sailing-vessel, gorged with spices from the East—and it was on the deck of the *Rover* that the speakers were standing and talking of their homes. The *Rover* was waiting for many things—for orders from its owners, for the turn of the tide, for the busy little tug to drag its giant form to the docks, for the captain who had gone ashore, for custom-house folk who were still curious to know whether or not goods contraband had found their way on board, for half-a-dozen other matters which to sailors close upon their journey's end

were equally aggravating and vexatious. The home-fever was on the crew. There were fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, to see, very shortly now, and here was the *Rover* idling time away ; two tides had ebbcd and flowed already, and home seemed none the nearer. Dick Eston had not borne this delay more philosophically than the majority of his companions—it was only James Strahan who was cool and calm, and not particularly elated at the prospect of his return ; who seemed, in his mind's eye, to picture a welcome back different from his friends, and to have a shadow thrown upon him in consequence. And yet his was a bold and fearless face, which looked out at the world bravely, and did not shrink or pale at it—the handsome, heavily-bearded face of a man of two or three-and-thirty, bronzed much by Eastern suns, and not any the worse for the operation. A friend to put faith in, we may sum up with ; and though the other was a gentleman's son, a man of many accomplishments, a wild, fly-away fellow in his way—it had been always this Jem Strahan—rough and ready, plain-speaking Jem—whom Dick Eston trusted and made a friend of, for reasons somewhat difficult for him to analyze.

James Strahan looked up suddenly, and found Dick Eston surveying him with a half-thoughtful,

half-puzzled expression, which was new to Dick, who thought very little, and gave up at once anything which perplexed him. The cloud vanished from Strahan's face, and he said, lightly and bluntly :

"What are you staring at, Dick?"

"I don't know—I hardly know," said Dick irresolutely; "but there, I can't make you out. Two years have we been away from England and yet I don't understand you any more than on the first day we called each other 'mate.' You're not a sly man, and you're less like a humbug than any fellow I ever knew, though—though——"

"Though I drink water, and hate rum!" added his friend.

"Though you have a nasty habit of preaching at a fellow, I was going to say, and making him promise all kinds of things which——"

"Which he never keeps, poor Dick. But which he will, one of these fine days, I think—and hope."

"For your sake—eh?"

"Oh! no—for the sake of the sister down in Devonshire."

"Ay, God bless little Sissie," said the man, the tears springing suddenly to his eyes. "I will not make her heart ache as I did the old father's and mother's. I've promised that too, haven't I,

Jem ; and she shall never know anything but good of me. By Jove, you shall see how strong and firm a man I'll be—presently ! Why, even my excellent friend here, with all his virtues in full bloom, shall hide his head at my superior excellence."

"Ay, there you go," said Strahan, moodily, "from what you think sentiment, to what I call your darned impudence—and all in one breath."

"Everything by turns, and nothing long, perhaps ; but what did you want to talk about my sister for ?" Dick cried petulantly.

"It's the only one you seem to care about, at times."

"Yes, but you unsettle me. You're such an odd beast."

"And I don't place confidence in you, you believe ?"

"Not a bit."

"I've very little more to tell you," said Strahan, "and what I *have* kept back was to save you from a story which would not interest you much. I haven't a home in Devonshire ; there are no roses outside my cottage walls ; there is not a sister waiting for me—and that's all."

"No, I'm hanged if it is," said Dick. "What did you go to sea for ? Why have you been wandering all over the globe with your mouth

shut, and your eyes open ; why do you never speak of your home, my reticent, able-bodied seaman, but are always worrying about mine ?”

James Strahan’s face assumed a sternness which was not common to it, but which might indicate, for all that, that James had his faults and was not the perfect being—the model sailor—at whom his companions laughed and sneered.

“Do you want to know all this ?” asked he sharply.

“Oh ! I don’t care to pry into anybody’s secrets,” answered Dick ; “I’m not inquisitive.”

“It’s a painful story, and you don’t like pain ; but—” and here a strong man’s hand grasped the arm of his companion till Dick winced again—“I will tell you before we say good-bye.”

“Is there much of a moral to it ?”

“No,” said Strahan, mournfully, “there is no moral. That’s the worst of it.”

“A story without a moral, and from Jem Strahan. Who’s going to believe that, do you think ?”

“The moral will come by-and-by—I am waiting for it,” said Jem, “and I may live to see it yet.”

He fell into a deeper reverie after this, and Dick Eston made no effort to disturb it : on the contrary, wandered away, lighted and smoked his

pipe at a distance from his friend, leant again over the ship's side and looked wistfully beyond the silver river at the green hills of Kent, wondering when the *Rover* would glide upon its way once more. There was little doing on board ship, and a proportion of the men was allowed to quit it for a limited period of the day: presently James Strahan took advantage of this, and went ashore for half an hour, returning with sundry packages and a large parrot's cage which he had purchased in the town. The light was on his face again and the shadows had all vanished as he scrambled up the ship's side with his goods.

"Well, for a man alone in the world, and without a home and friends to think about," was Dick's greeting, "you have been going it in the way of purchases."

"I never said I was alone in the world, Dick; but you jump at conclusions always."

"I wish I could jump to London," said Dick flippantly. "I want to be free of this prison-ship, and to feel myself beyond all the rules and regulations of the service. I've twenty friends waiting to see me. I've telegraphed to everybody I know, or used to know, and here I am stuck!"

"Well, it gives you time to consider whether it

is worth while to meet your friends, and leave the sister out in the cold."

"I go to Devonshire to-morrow or next day. Do you grudge me one night's fling?"

"What do you call a fling?"

"Look here, Jem, that little game won't do. It's *not* Thursday. I promised to listen to you on Thursdays only, to stand all your cold-water sermons and your red-hot homilies then, if you would keep quiet for the rest of the week—and a promise *is* a promise."

"I wish I had not made it," Jem said reluctantly; "but I fancied that on one of these Thursdays——"

"You'd work a miracle, and make a disciple of Dick Eston, and—by all that's lucky, here's the captain coming—there goes the signal for the tug—we're on the move—we're off—we're off at last!" and Dick executed on deck a double shuffle of delight, winding up by a vigorous kick to the bottom of the cage which James Strahan had bought for his parrot.

Dick Eston was right. The *Rover* had received its orders from the Docks, and there was no more time to waste. All was commotion and excitement, the sailors were as busy as bees, orders were being shouted hoarsely by the captain and mate, the anchor was weighed, the anchor chain

was clanking and rattling on board, the tug had steamed to them and flung its rope towards them, the spell of inaction was broken, and it was nearer home than ever to many yearning hearts under the blue jackets.

CHAPTER II.

SHADWELL WAY.

WITH the progress of the *Rover* up the river Thames we need not trouble our reader ; with the details of payments, dismissals, and re-engagements our story has nothing to do ; life begins with our characters beyond this little ship, and with men and women who have lives and thoughts apart from it. The *Rover* was in dock, and two men, dissatisfied with service in it, and with the owners of it, and with the life on board of it, had for reasons very contrary turned their backs upon it for good. These were James Strahan and Richard Eston, and they were proceeding out of the London Docks together, the former with his arms heaped up with parcels, his parrot cage tenanted, his curiosities clasped to his breast ; the latter with a pipe in his mouth, and his hands in his trousers pockets, slouching along in a loose and careless style strangely in contrast to the quick decisive steps of his companion. It looked as if Dick Eston had already found time hanging heavily upon him.

"Where do you meet your friends?" asked James Strahan; "I don't see any of the twenty hereabouts."

"No—they haven't troubled themselves much," Dick said acrimoniously. "I suppose a common seaman is hardly respectable enough for them now—and Dick of the *Rover* is a different thing from Richard Eston who ran through his father's property to keep their goodly company. Confound them all, say I."

"Amen, if they helped you down the hill, Dick."

"I might have helped them—I don't know—I don't remember," was the reckless comment here, "and I don't care."

"Why not go to Devonshire this evening?"

"No. I said I'd be at 'The Rosy Morn,' in the Highway to-night, if possible, and if they don't choose to come, let them stop away."

"I can't blame them for stopping away from 'The Rosy Morn.' Of all the dens——"

"Oh! you know it, then, Saint James? Ha! ha! Caught at last!" and Dick roused the echoes of the street with his laughter, and slapped fiercely the back of his friend, disturbing seriously the equilibrium of many of the parcels, not one of which, from sheer thoughtlessness, had he offered to carry.

"Yes, I know it," was Jem's answer.

"Been in it, perhaps?"

"Many times."

"Well, that's a queer confession for a teetotaller!"

"I've been in it, Dick, hundreds of times—after my father and mother!"

The voice was full of sorrow, even of solemnity now, and Eston was astonished and distressed.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Jem,—I'm sorry," he cried; "I did not mean to say anything. I'm precious sorry I said a word about it."

"Never mind; that's part of the story I am going to tell you to-morrow, perhaps to-night."

"To-night, Jem, I have friends to meet at the 'Rosy Morn;' some of our mates of the *Rover* are coming too. Ah! there'll be rare fun."

"And you don't ask me to join in it?"

"Oh! you would spoil the sport, we can't ask you."

"Never mind. You will come home with me first."

"Why?"

"It is not much of a home, but you shall be welcome in it, Dick. And it has one merit—it's only four streets away."

"That's an inducement, but——" said the other, I see mischief in those artful brown eyes of yours,

and a sermon over the tea and shrimps ; you don't do it, Jamie."

And with another slap on James Strahan's shoulder, he prepared to turn away. Suddenly he stopped again.

"Had we not better say good-bye now, Jem?" he suggested. "I may be off early to-morrow, and to-morrow's Thursday," he added with a visible shudder, "and Jamie's at his worst."

"That's a hard phrase, Dick."

"Well, at his best—looking at it from a higher standpoint, eh?—But you'll come?"

"If I say I will, I will."

"Then say it."

"Not if I know it," cried Dick. "If you want me, you will find me at 'The Rosy Morn!'"

"I will come then."

"You!"

"'If I say I will, I will!'" said James Strahan, echoing his friend's late assertion, "and I have said so, Dick."

Dick murmured "all right," but he was once more perplexed as he stood on the kerbstone looking after his friend.

"He's an odd fish," he said to himself ; "he preaches—he doesn't drink. He is not my sort. He is not good-tempered ; he's a bit aggravating, and yet he draws me to him somehow. I can

trust old Jem. I could tell him anything, and rely upon him to do anything for me. That's why I like him, I suppose ; I, who never liked anybody much save Sissie."

Leaving Dick Eston still wondering, James Strahan, borne down by parcels, continued his progress through Shadwell, towards St. George's Street, as it is known now-a-days in postal districts, though, to all time, in sailors' memories to be recorded as the Highway.

He had not been so long away but that there were those to remember him. The Strahans were old inhabitants of St. George's-in-the-East, known for many reasons, good, bad, and indifferent, the bad and indifferent predominating. One or two of the shopkeepers, standing at their doors gasping for air that hot August evening, nodded their heads at him, the baker at the corner shook hands with him and the parcels, and said he was glad to see him back again, as there was a long score owing, and he had relied upon James Strahan clearing up arrears ; and an old woman shuffling along in one boot and one carpet slipper, bonnetless, grey haired and yellow, gave a scream of surprise at seeing him, and would have kissed him had he stooped to meet those thin, quivering, moustached lips of hers.

"What, Jem Strahan—back again ! With heaps

of presents too!" she croaked forth, more like a witch than woman. "Which is mine, now, out of all that splendacious lot, my boy?"

"Good evening," said James Strahan bluntly. "Still Shadwell way, then?"

"Still Shadwell way! Where else, except in her coffin, did you expect to find old Dinah?" she asked.

"Ah, yes," said the sailor absently; "I forgot—you like the place, it suits you."

"Will you stand us a drink?—a friend of the family—bless your noble heart, Jamie, and tip us the price of a half-quartern, ony a half-quartern, for old times' sake. I'm hard up, or I wouldn't ask yer. Yer will now, Jamie, won't yer?" she whined forth piteously. A woman pleading for her life could have hardly begged more earnestly than this poor gin-soddened mortal.

"No!" he said firmly. "I can't do that."

"And I so drefful thirsty too—why, jest like yer scaly father that is. And, oh! the friend I've been to him; the care I've took of him when the perlice have brought him 'ome, and the care I've took of 'ome when the perlice have locked him up. Ony the price of half-a-quartern, Jamie, and may the blessing——"

"Hold hard—that'll do," said the sailor.

"You begrudge me the price of——"

"I'll buy you a loaf of bread, Dinah. Will you have that?"

"Fippence a four-pund loaf—hand over the coin, and make me happy, lad," cried the old woman,

"I'll buy you the loaf, I said. But——"

"Then it's a beastly want of confidence, Jamie."

James Strahan walked back to the baker's, purchased Dinah's loaf of bread, and left Dinah in possession of the article, and offering it presently, at reduced terms, to a female acquaintance sitting on a cool door-step a few yards lower down. He walked on at a more rapid pace, as if to be quit of this shadow of the streets. He was nearing his home, but his heart was sinking, not throbbing with any exultation, at the welcome which awaited him. He had outlived all welcomes long ago; he was wanted for his money, not for himself. His mother was dead, his father was afraid of him, his brother was away, and home had only been a home-wreck for more years than he cared to look back upon. How he had escaped he hardly knew; how he had emerged from this awful darkness he could scarcely explain; but he would try and tell Dick Eston to-morrow. Close to his father's house, and before the doors of another public-house, two men faced him with the same

half-vacant, half-cunning look with which drink stamps its votaries.

"Jem Strahan!—is it *him*? Hanged if it ain't!"

These two men had been almost like friends to James Strahan once upon a time—a dark time not to be regarded with any pleasure now. They were neighbours and friends of his father. They were not to be shaken off so easily as old Dinah, "Down-the-Dolly Dinah," as she was termed in the Highway, owing to a gambling toy, upon the chances of which the youth of Shadwell staked sundry halfpence in her establishment on Saturdays, and even on Sundays when the official eye was not upon their movements.

This time it was, "You'll drink with us, Jem—you'll take a glass. Not a step further, old pal, without a glass."

"I don't drink."

"What, a sailor, and don't drink!" was the astonished exclamation here.

"A Strahan, and don't drink!" cried the second man. "Oh! that ain't likely."

"I tell you I drink nothing but water. I'll take a glass of that with you, if you'll come with me."

"No—thankēe. Not if you offered me a pail-ful."

"Then good evening."

"Oh! good evening to you, Mister Strahan!"
was the ironical reply.

It was in this fashion that James Strahan reached home. The two men looked after him down the squalid street, and shrugged their shoulders and grinned like apes at one another.

"A sailor, and don't drink? My stars! what is coming to the man?" said one.

Ay, what is coming? Who can tell from the misty border land, over which this honest fellow passes, what is lurking in the background and hiding its time? Here at present is the courage to say, "No," and the will to cry, "Stop." Where is the prophet to augur what will come, for good or for evil, to this strong young life?

CHAPTER III.

"DICK'S FLING."

IT was a dull home, that of Mr. Strahan's. No marvel that the sailor's face had not brightened at the prospect of returning to it. He shivered as he entered, and the shadows in the place submerged and depressed him. The street door had been left ajar whilst Mr. Strahan, senior, had gone "round the corner" for his evening glass, and James pushed it open and entered the room unchallenged and unwelcomed. He had written to say that it was likely he should return that evening, and there was his letter, screwed into a pipe-light and half-burnt, lying in the empty grate. It was a house haunted by neglect—a drunkard's home, where the dust lay thick, and everything was in its wrong place—where the furniture was broken, the little looking-glass over the mantelpiece a wreck, the china figures all headless, and a chair, over which the owner had fallen last night, still lying on its side on a threadbare hearth-rug which was scuffled into a heap in one corner of the room.

James Strahan put down his parcels, and his parrot, and looked round him. He walked into the back room ; he went up a flight of dirty stairs and inspected the apartments above. He descended into the front parlour again, picked up the prostrate chair and sat down, with an ugly frown puckering his forehead, and his big brown hand clenched upon the table. It was not a pleasant welcome home, and he did not look pleasantly before him—or like a hero now.

“I won’t forgive the old man,” he muttered ; “he might have kept at home for one day. I will never forgive him this,” and here the brown hand came down on the deal table like a sledge hammer. He thought next that he would light a candle, but there was no candle to be found—only an empty candlestick with heavy lengths of grease hanging from it, which gave it a stalactite appearance, and this, in his anger, he pitched into the fender.

“I am glad Dick didn’t come home with me. It is worse than it has ever been—worse than it shall ever be again, or I come back no more,” he exclaimed.

He ruminated deeply till the night was thick upon him, and he was part of its darkness. The light from the street-lamp threw a distorted

pattern of the window on the grimy ceiling ; the parrot croaked and moved restlessly in its cage ; they were quarrelling in the street outside ; there were strains of dance-music welling from open windows of the public-houses in the Highway, but he was not aware of them ; he was thinking of Dick Eston, and what a lucky thing his friend had not come to Peter's Row to spend the evening with him.

Lucky ! Well, he was not quite so sure of that. Dick was not a proud man ; he would have only laughed, and at least he would have been out of the gin-shop. He, James Strahan, had let him go there too easily, and had not done his best to keep him from "The Rosy Morn." He was too much afraid of being thought a bore, and he had let Dick have his own way, when perhaps he might have stopped him by a stronger effort. Dick had reminded him that it was not Thursday—the day only allowed for "preaching" by the terms of their odd contract together—and he had let Dick drift from him. The friend was on his conscience now. James Strahan was unhappy about him—he had not done his best for him. Dick was weak, and there was a sister waiting for him down in Devon, and counting every hour before he came back to her. It was no use waiting for the father. James Strahan would go in search of a friend whom he

should be sorry to lose. He was not afraid of "The Rosy Morn," or of the drink there—he would be a restraint upon Dick Eston—he might be even able to induce Dick to come away—it was not too late to do the duty on which his heart was set—why, it was only the eleventh hour! There would be plenty at "The Rosy Morn" to laugh at him and his "prejudices"—well, let them laugh for once.

He seized his cap and strode into the street, leaving the door ajar as he had found it. He passed from Peter's Row into the Highway, where men and women were thick and jostling each other on the narrow pavement, where the sailors of all countries were passing to and fro, and the women were bare-headed and flaunting in cheap jewellery and bright colours—where the gin-shops were numerous and their lights streamed into the street, and the music from upstairs' rooms filled the air with discordant notes as they clashed in contrast or in noisy opposition. There had been many ships come into dock that day, and the Highway was extra busy, and with its vice paraded extra shameless—the drink-fiend was abroad, and its victims were reeling from the wall to the miry road, and from the road back again, clutching at lamp-posts or steadier passers-by—the police were in pairs, grim-visaged, watchful men, with a

sense of danger to themselves and of wild beasts abroad. Suddenly—and yet after a fashion common to this awful neighbourhood—there awoke a greater horror, a greater uproar in the streets—there were five hundred voices shouting, swearing, blaspheming, as if Hades had been let loose upon the night—men, women, and children were rushing to "The Rosy Morn," from whose doors a surging and excited mob was streaming forth; the windows were flung up of all the houses near; there was a rattle being sprung, and a cry of "murder" from more than one excited throat.

James Strahan, with a consciousness of coming evil, dashed into the crowd, fought his way with all his power and strength into its midst, where women were shrieking, and English, Spanish, Chinese, Greek and Negro faces were all looking down upon a something lying on the pavement—a something very still now, and which would never move again.

"What is it?" gasped Strahan; "for mercy's sake, what is it?"

"Only another row at 'The Rosy Morn'—he's knifed for certain," said one.

"He's dead—gone—but it was his own fault," cried another.

James Strahan pushed the last section of the crowd

aside in his unconscious strength and impulse, and then gazed down with the rest.

Yes—it was as he had feared from the first. It was poor Dick Eston, for whom the sister down in Devon would wait a long time now.

CHAPTER IV.

OUTSIDE "THE ROSY MORN."

WAS it a part of a dream—fever-haunted and ghastly, and he not free from its horrors—thought Jem Strahan, or was this really the grim reality and the terrible end of it? It might be either for what he knew, or seemed to comprehend. Surely it was not possible that Dick Eston was lying dead before him on the miry pavement!

"No, no—not dead!" he cried, kneeling down beside him. "Look up, Dick—its Jamie, your old pal. Oh! won't you say a word to me?"

The crowd gathered more densely round him—the faces multiplied and became more hideous—the helmets of the police swayed above the crowd—the noise of every one talking, arguing, and quarrelling, was like the sea he had left two days ago, and left for this!

"Who's done it—how did it happen?" asked a policeman, leaning over the body with James Strahan. "What had you to do with it?"

"This man's my mate; I had only left him, well and strong, an hour or so ago. I—I—can't

believe I've lost him, mind you—I don't believe it yet."

"Is he in it?" asked the policeman, appealing to the bystanders.

"No—he's just come," cried a woman; "it was a Spanish fellow, with rings in his ears—he couldn't stand Dick's chaff."

"No, sa'ar, dat was on'y the beginning on it," explained a black sailor, big, bloated and beery. "Dey got fighting, but José didn't draw his knife; dey was all fighting togedder—lots on 'em. Dat's one of 'em, sa'ar—dat's anudder. And dat's anudder wretch who kicked me on de shin, de spiteful brute. Lookee here, sa'ar, dere's a drefful kick!"

And unmindful of the want of attention to his own particular wrongs, Sambo knelt down in the road, and rolled up a dirty blue trouser over a black leg which had evidently been maltreated by a heavy boot.

Another woman volunteered her statement, but it was more incoherent than the rest, she being more excited in her drink. This was "Down-the-Dolly Dinah," who, with her grey hair loose about her face, was screaming and gesticulating in an insane fashion, a very Hecate in her fury.

"It wasn't José—I know José well enuf—he never touched his knife—it wasn't any on 'em—I saw it all—I saw it all—I saw it all, I tell you!" she

screached forth continuously, "till that black beast came jumping on my bad foot. Who's got my carpet shoe?—I shall ketch my death o' cold—I saw it all—Mister Perliceman, take my evidence, I know everythink about it."

"Get out, Dinah," said the policeman, with a friendly push.

"Sha'n't," said Dinah, with a vicious claw at the official features, which were hastily drawn back.

"Let this gentleman come forward—can't you?" and in a less friendly spirit the policeman's hand fell upon Dinah's fragile form, which disappeared immediately amidst the crowd, though Dinah's voice, getting higher and higher in its notes, was heard amidst the general confusion.

The gentleman for whom Dinah gave way was a little man in glasses: the police had recognized him, and secured him at once. He was stooping down, with his hand in the jacket of the prostrate sailor.

"He's quite dead," said the surgeon on the instant.

"Oh, no, sir!—don't say 'quite!'" implored Jem; "only five-and-twenty, sir, and to die like this."

The doctor shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah! this dreadful drink," he said, as he hurried away; "always the drink!"

Meanwhile the mob increased in numbers, and the police in strength, and there was too much business in the Highway to attend to James Strahan's grief. There were half-a-dozen men to arrest on suspicion, to begin with ; another half-a-dozen to take as witnesses to the police station ; all that remained of poor Dick Eston to remove to a fitting or unfitting place of rest until the inquest, and the stern truth to sift from a mass of words, and from a medley of muddled brains. James Strahan was of no further interest to anybody ; he knew nothing of the murder, and was only a friend of the man who had been struck down—let him get home and out of the streets ; he was a minor character in such a tragedy. He did not follow to the police station ; he was still a dream-figure, standing like a man in a dream, dazed by the horrors which had surrounded him. The crowd drifted away, and he drifted with it for a while, and then came to a full stop, to consider what was to be done, and what had been done on that night which would for ever be burned in letters of fire upon his memory. "The Rosy Morn" was closing its shutters to avoid the publicity which had been thrust upon it ; but the music had begun again in half-a-dozen opposition houses of entertainment for man and beast, especially beast, and the singing, dancing, and general revelry of the Highway

had recommenced with all the extra vigour born of half-an-hour's delay. Murder was not so uncommon an occurrence Shadwell Way as to baulk the people of their pleasures long. Why, it was this amusement, social science folk had asserted more than once, which kept the thoughts of murder out of drunken people's heads.

There was a drizzling rain descending, which helped to thin the streets—they were struggling for drink before the bars of all the devil's palaces, when some one touched James Strahan on the arm, lightly and almost deferentially, and a tall, shabbily-dressed, slip-shod man, with his hat on the back of his head, said to him,—

"James, I have been looking for you everywhere. You don't know how anxious I have been about you."

"Have you?" said James Strahan.

"I got your letter, and waited at home until——"

"That's false," answered the son sharply; "you did not wait at home at all."

"You will excuse me, James," said the father, moving from his heels to his tiptoes and back again with great precision, "but you do not allow me to finish my statement. I was about to observe that I waited at home until six in the evening, and then I had to balance a friend's books—Parkins's books, the pork-butcher," he explained still further,

"whose books want balancing most fearfully, but will not come right under any circumstances whatever, owing to the sausages. Singular, don't you think, James?"

The son did not answer, and the father eyed him critically and furtively, and gave vent to a nervous little cough behind the thin hand which the son had never offered to take in his. It was a strange meeting after two years of separation, and told of two strange natures and strange lives.

"You will come home now, James. I have seen your presents and things, and I'm very much obliged to you; though why you should waste your money on a parrot—which, in my humble opinion is a most abominable bird—I don't know. Still it is kind—it touches me to the quick—it——"

He was drawing out a dirty red cotton handkerchief to wipe his eyes, when his son's quick voice checked him.

"Do you know what has happened to-night?"

"They told me at Paddy's Goose—I mean at Parkins's—that somebody or other was stabbed," he replied.

"A friend of mine—the only one I had in the world, perhaps—has met his death to-night. Do you think I am in a fitting mood to bear with *you*?"

"We should all bear our troubles bravely," said

old Strahan, sententiously. "Why, I bear with you—trial as you are."

"Ah, yes—I'm a trial to you," repeated the son ;
"and now, will you go home?"

"Yes—but——"

"I shall return soon. Get the upstairs room ready for Dick, will you?"

"Good gracious! Who's Dick?"

"My dead friend. I'm going to take care of him, if they'll let me, till he's buried. It's rather late to take care of the poor fellow—if I'd only done my duty by him earlier!"

"You'll never be so foolish as to offer to take care of—of such a dreadful thing as that?" said old Strahan, his teeth beginning to chatter in his head. "I'm not a nervous man—I—I—I've the will of a lion—but I really could not, James, allow this, even to oblige you. I should have fits—I should die. A screeching parrot is an affliction enough, but there is a vast difference between that and a dead sailor, and I——"

"Go home, and wait for him," said his son, sternly; and the father, cowering strangely, offered not another word of opposition, but turned away, and went shuffling down the street, whilst James Strahan strode off in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER V.

DOWN IN DEVON.

POOR Dick Eston should have been a painter, as his friend Strahan had suggested—he drew his pictures so true to the life. The artistic spirit, born of a heart yearning for home, and the one home-face that was left, had sketched the picture faithfully, and the colours were not too bright and fair.

It was the cottage down in Devon, just as he had portrayed it to his friend: the home on the slope of the green hill—the roses clustering over the porch and cottage walls, the glistening little lattice-windows, the rose-bushes thick with fragrant bloom in the trim garden; and at the gate, where the man who had drawn the picture had set his central figure, was the sister standing, with a fair white hand shading her blue eyes from the sunshine, and looking for him who would come to her no more. It was as he had seen it in his mental vision—the spirit of prophecy had been upon him in that hour.

Sissie Eston waited for her brother. It was

Thursday afternoon of that bright summer, and she had many hopes that he would turn the bend of the road within a few more minutes. From the window of her room she had seen the London train wind swiftly through the landscape, had heard the warning whistle as it approached the station amongst the pine trees, a mile and a half away; and she was sure—oh! very sure—that brother Dick was a passenger, and was coming now, with a brisk quick step, along the dusty road to home.

Fair as the landscape was about her, she was the fairest object in it—a pretty, bright-faced girl of twenty years, tall, lithe and graceful, looking every inch “the lady born.” As she stood there, a rosy-cheeked plump Devonshire lass, in a chronic state of smile, came clattering in thick-soled boots along the garden-path towards her, her smart cap-trimmings fluttering in the breeze.

“Don’t you see him, Missie, yet?” she cried, planting herself without much ceremony before Miss Eston, in her eagerness.

“Not yet, Polly.”

“Than he bean’t coom by the train.”

“It’s a good step from the station, Polly, and Dick was never one to make any great degree of haste,” replied the young mistress. “I dare say some of the old friends have met him at the station,”

"And I dare say they haven't," Polly remarked. "There, it's no use looking any longer—that's the last train which will stop at Tentercombe to-day ; all the rest of 'em will go a-rushin' and a-snorting past, the monsters !"

"No—no—you're wrong, Polly. Look there—ever so far off, coming the cross-cut along Farmer Measom's fields—there he is ! Don't you see the sailor's dress ?" cried Sissie.

It was the last feature*in the mental picture drawn but yesterday by Richard Eston—the maiden clapped her hands and laughed for joy. It was the last laugh for many a long day ; and the sunshine on that scene became presently only one more bitter memory.

"Sure enough, it's a real sailor," said Polly ; "but he's grown a lot o' hair about his face since he wor here last, Missie."

"Oh, that doesn't matter ; and I'm sure it's Dick. English sailors are not likely to be plentiful in Tentercombe."

She waved her handkerchief towards the man coming along the field-path, but he did not see her, or at least respond to her salutation. He came on very rapidly—she had never known Dick walk as fast as that ; but then it was home to which he was advancing, and there is no place like it !

"What's he looking on the ground for?" asked Polly.

"Just to tease me—just to pretend, the tiresome fellow, that he doesn't see me. Just to—— Oh! I'm not so sure it's Dick, now!"

"No—it bean't the master, sure eno'—that's not the young master's walk—and yon man's taller by a good three inches," said the maid.

"No—yes—but the sailor's dress, Polly—in this inland village, on the day, at the very hour, Dick said he would come home," said Sissie. "What does this man want?"

"It's funny-like," answered Polly; "but Master Richard bean't the only sailor in the world."

"No—but——"

And then Sissie could say no more, or do anything but watch the seaman coming towards her like a fate. He was surely approaching the house—he had leaped the stile and was on the high road now—he was looking towards them with a very grave stern face, or else her nervous fancies were getting fast the better of her.

"Polly, I'm growing afraid," whispered Sissie, with the colour slowly dying out of her cheeks.

"Oh! what nonsense; just because an English sailor—and he mayn't be an English sailor either—comes along the road that's free to all. You makes me creep, Miss Sissie."

"Yes—yes—I'm very foolish, I know ; but how strange it all is !"

Closer and closer came the figure towards them—there were letters on his cap too, she could see them very plainly—and in another instant read them very plainly also.

"Heaven's mercy on me—*Rover*," she whispered, as her right hand clutched at the wicket gate for her support. The man was standing before her now, but she saw him through a blinding mist. The look upon his earnest face told something of the story, and she shrank from him full of fear, to the strong support of the maid-servant by her side.

It was thus that James Strahan met Sissie Eston for the first time in his life.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BAD NEWS.

IT was no light task which James Strahan had set himself—which he had started that morning by the early train to fulfil. In the pocket of the dead man's jacket had been found a letter from his sister, and by this means had she been traced. It had suggested at once a plan of action to Dick's old comrade: he would not trust the post or the telegraph to break such news as it was his ill-luck to carry.

Standing before her in the little parlour, he felt the difficulties increase, and that he had overtasked his nerves. He did not know much of woman's ways—he had never been a lady's man—he even, we are ashamed to confess, had once been heard to declare that all women were “poor, weak, chattering things;” and yet he had been strangely drawn towards Dick's sister, because Dick had spoken of her with a full heart, and she had been some one whom Dick Eston loved. He had undertaken this long journey to spare her the pain of a brusque revelation; he had correctly estimated

that in an inland and out-of-the-way Devonshire village the London newspapers would not reach her before himself, and the tragedy had no especial features in it to warrant the news agencies making capital from it by "special wire." A man struck down in a drunken brawl at a public-house—what was there new and fresh in that? Was not the shadow of death—as is the shadow of evil—for ever hanging over the Temple of Bacchus? Every newspaper in the land that morning was full of the horrors born of drink, to shame us as a Christian nation—why should the case of Richard Eston awaken any interest save in this man and woman? It was so common-place—it was the everyday blot on English life, with nothing new about it—it was only one more victim!

But, oh! the difference to Sissie Eston, thought James Strahan, as he stood before her, twisting his cap round in his big nervous hands, and evading the wild, imploring looks of her blue eyes.

It was she who broke the silence.

"You have brought me bad news. Why don't you speak?" she cried, harshly. "Why do you stand staring there at me?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Eston," said Jem, at last, in a hoarse voice; "though I have come in a hurry, I can't speak in a hurry. I—I would

rather not speak in a hurry," he added, very thoughtfully.

"You come from my brother—who are you? where is he? what has happened? why has he sent a message by you? Why——"

She paused to struggle with her breath, and James Strahan struck in here before she could bewilder him with further questioning.

"Yes, I have come from your brother. My name is James Strahan, your brother's friend, of whom you may have heard."

"Yes, I have heard of you," she said in a low whisper now, as the deep voice of the speaker reverberated in that room; "he has written about you to me. I—I have pictured you," she added, for a moment hesitatingly, "as his good genius, taking care of him a little, as an elder brother might almost—guiding and warning him. In any trouble, he told me once, he thought you were the one man whom he could trust; and now the trouble has come, I read upon your face."

"Yes, Miss Eston, I must own it has," he confessed.

"Heaven help me—what is it? You will not keep me longer in suspense, sir. I—I am very strong; I am quite prepared now."

"I don't think you are, poor young lady," said the sailor.

"Oot with it, man ; d'ye think we're made of barley-sugar ?" said the unceremonious Polly, also full of anxiety and curiosity ; but a maid-servant of the good old school, with interests and feelings bound up with those she served.

"I don't want to frighten you, Miss Eston, but it's a hard task to tell the truth," said James. "When I started this morning from London, I thought myself mighty strong and clever—the only one who could do this bit of business—but, after all, I am only a fool of a sailor, you see. All I can say is," he added humbly, but with a new earnestness that was very touching in that hour, and which, at a later period, Sissie Eston gratefully remembered, "that you should be prepared for bad news, very bad news—say the very worst news—and ask the good God to give you strength to bear it ; as I did for you—if you don't mind the liberty I took—before I came away. There, I think you can guess all now, without any further muddling of mine."

The eyes dilated more and more, the colour wholly vanished from the cheeks of his listener, the look of horror settled there as though the fair young girl was struck suddenly to stone.

"My brother—is—dead !" she gasped forth.

James Strahan bowed his head, but did not answer in words. That was the whole grim truth,

and there was no more to be said. Dick's sister looked at him with horror still, as at an enemy who had robbed her of her peace of mind ; then she suddenly gave way, and, with a low wail of despair, turned and flung her arms round the faithful servant's neck, and burying her head in her bosom, sobbed like a child.

"Don't 'ee, ma'am ; don't 'ee go on like this. I never seed ye so before ; I can't bear it," cried the servant. "Get oot o' the house-place for a bit, can't ye," she shouted to James Strahan ; "now you've doon all the meescheef, go in the garden and eat the plums, wull ye now ?"

"Hush, Polly !" cried Sissie ; "this was my poor brother's friend. Oh, Dick, Dick, to think that I shall never see you any more."

She had broken down utterly, and James Strahan thought it was a wise step to withdraw, as Polly had unceremoniously suggested. He would not eat any plums—he did not like plums—but he could escape into the garden for a while, and till this tempest of sorrow had spent itself in tears. Here he was very much in the way, it was evident.

He went away and wandered about the garden disconsolately ; he tried feebly to rehearse the story of Dick's death to himself, to fashion it into a shape less horrible in its stern reality, and more

fitting for this poor sister to hear. He had done his best, or worst ; now if he could spare her something of the details, or soften them by talking of the brother's love for her, and of the better side of this lost brother's character, it would be well. He was left a long time there, and he was grateful for it—it gave them time, and gave him time. After a while he felt quite strong, and more like his usual self ; only a little while ago he was thinking what an idiot he was to come blundering two hundred miles to blurt out a story which a child might have told with greater tact ; but now, and for some unaccountable reason, he was thankful that he had undertaken the task. Dick would have wished it, he was certain ; and presently he might be of use to these two scared women-folk.

He waited for them a long while, growing at last very weary of fruits and flowers, and wondering very much how much longer the women would keep him at a distance. He had to return to London that evening, travelling by the night mail, in order to be at the inquest in the morning ; this was to be explained also as carefully and delicately as it was in his power ; and there was more to do than that before he went away. Sissie Eston stole at last towards him. She was very white, but her eyes were dry and her step was

steady. There was a firm look upon her face too, he thought, as if she had arrived at some new resolution, born of this day of revelation. And James Strahan was right in his surmise. Sissie Eston's next step was to surprise him very much. "Women are strange," says the satirist.

CHAPTER VII.

SISSIE ESTON MAKES UP HER MIND.

"JAMES STRAHAN," said Sissie Eston, when she was facing our hero, "I will go back with you to London."

"Go back with me!" he repeated; "no, no, that is acting in too much of a hurry, Miss Eston."

"I have made up my mind," she said, firmly.

"But I must leave here in half an hour, and——"

"I will be ready in half an hour."

James Strahan was perplexed—taken aback even—by the quick decisive answer. For the first time in his life, perhaps, he did not see his way very clearly—all his forethought was completely at fault.

"I did not think you would act in this go-ahead fashion, young lady," he muttered, as they walked together towards the house, "it is a step which requires more consideration than you have given. You remind me of your brother—he never thought; poor Dick—he wouldn't think!"

"I *have* thought very deeply."

"Still——"

"My brother is in London—I must go to him," said Sissie Eston.

"Well, well," replied James Strahan, "I can't say you nay—I can't say but that this is the right step. I haven't had time to think. I'm clean off my head, I fancy!"

"Don't trouble your head about me, please," said Sissie; "only take me to my brother."

"You trust strangers quickly," James Strahan remarked.

"You are no stranger to me. I have said already you were the man whom Dick trusted—surely I can trust you too?"

"You can," murmured James Strahan; "but you have only my word for it."

"That is enough, thank you. Now tell me of my brother," she asked quickly. "When he met his death, and how. I am strong, and can bear the truth, with God's help."

They entered the cottage parlour, where a simple lunch was awaiting them. James Strahan and his hostess sat down with heavy hearts, and with grave faces to match. The buxom Polly flitted at the back in attendance upon them, and with her big round eyes fixed upon James Strahan. When he told his sad miserable story, as gently and

briefly as he could, she stopped to listen to him, open-mouthed, until his keen glance became fixed upon her, when she moved round the table slowly, and with a glassy stare at him.

"What a tragedy!" said Sissie, with a shudder, when he had finished; "what an end to a life that I thought was full of promise still!"

"There was a heap of good in Dick," said her rough guest, "and there wasn't a better-hearted fellow under the sun. But you don't eat!"

Sissie Eston shook her head.

"Impossible," she murmured.

"You are going a long journey."

"I shall be strong enough for it."

Polly broke in here.

"But *you* don't drink your beer, man. And there's wine at your elbow, if you don't like beer," said Polly.

James Strahan frowned at this appeal, and then said, shortly, "I don't take such things."

"An abstainer?" said Sissie Eston, quietly.

"A teetotal chap—lor, who'd a thought of that now," said Polly.

"Hush! Polly, put water on the table, please."

"I have seen the misery that that stuff creates so often," he said, pointing to the wine; "it has been brought so close to my own doors and to my

own life, that I should be ashamed indeed if I had any love for it. And," he added, sternly, "but for it, and your brother would be here instead of in his coffin."

"Mercy, for Heaven's sake!" and then Sissie's colour faded away, and she fell back in a half-swoon, recovering herself very quickly, to discover Polly bathing her temples, and James Strahan bending over her with a grave anxiety upon his rugged face.

"Forgive me. I'm a dreadful brute," said James Strahan. "I blurt out hard truths without any thought for the feelings of others, and you are a girl terribly struck down. I am a fool. Don't mind me, please."

"No, no ; you are right, but——"

"But I might have spared you just then—his sister, too! I wonder," he said, very reflectively, "why I always say things at the wrong time and in the wrong place—why I'm such an atrociously awkward beast? When I want to do good I always do harm," he added, with an impatient stamp of his foot.

"I will tell you some day," said Sissie, thoughtfully regarding him, "when we are better friends, and——"

She paused.

"And—what?" he asked.

"And I understand you better," she concluded.

"Which you don't yet awhile, of course."

"Which I do not at all."

"Oh! I take time to understand," he said ;
"but still you trust me? You have said so."

"I trust you—with all my heart, as Dick did," she said.

"You don't know he did."

"Yes, I do."

"Then I never knew it. He never told me that I was anything but an aggravating fellow, a mar-plot, and a spoil-sport," said Strahan. "And yet I had an idea that I was like a brother to him sometimes. I——"

"Pray, say no more now. Tell me of him presently," said Sissie, "and then I will tell you what poor Dick thought of his friend James."

"Ay, thankee," murmured the man ; "I should be glad to know that."

"And now, let us get away."

"Yes," said Strahan, "that's all very well. But when you reach London what will you do?"

"I will come to your home."

"Whew!" whistled James Strahan.

"You will find your friend's sister a shelter for a few days?" said Sissie.

James Strahan's face shadowed very deeply.

"You don't know what a home mine is, madam,"

he said, sorrowfully; "in what a street, and in what a neighbourhood."

"I shall not care," was the quick answer.

"It is not fit for any woman to enter—no woman has entered since my mother's death—it is a drunkard's home."

"A drunkard's!"

"My father's, Miss Eston," he said, hanging down his head, "and I cannot offer you a shelter there."

Sissie Eston looked perplexed.

"I know nothing of London. And I must go to Dick."

"I thought Dick would have been at my house, but the police would not let me have him."

"I must go."

"We will think what is best when we are on the road," said Strahan.

"James Strahan, I *will* come to your house," she said decisively. "You were Dick's friend: you will be mine. See, sir, how alone in the world I stand now—how helpless, how weak!"

"Yes, and too young, too much like a big baby, if I may say so," he added, feeling that he was blurting out his hard truths again, "and with no knowledge of the world, I take it. And jumping at conclusions, like a harlequin!"

"I must face my dead brother, sir," she said piteously.

"You shall," answered Strahan, suddenly. "I see my way now, Dick's sister: I have got it all cut and dried. Here, you fat girl—I forget what they call you—put your bonnet on and some things together. You must come with your mistress."

"Must I?" cried Polly, "Oh! good gracious! I am so glad. And I may coom, Miss Sissie?"

"Yes, it is best; he thinks so."

"And Farmer Harris can keep the key till we coom back again—not that there's anybody mean enough to rob us in Tentercombe," said Polly.

"Or anything to rob us of," added her mistress.

Thus it was decided that Dick's sister and her maid should accompany James Strahan to London, and half an hour from that time, the women being quick and active, and with their hearts very eager for the journey, the three travellers turned their backs upon the cottage on the slope, and left the Devonshire roses—of which Dick Eston had spoken—to bloom alone in their beauty and fragrance for many a long day.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WOMAN WHO HAD HER OWN WAY.

BEFORE starting on that ever-memorable journey to London, James Strahan had set the telegraph working to a friend, giving him sundry instructions to be carried out forthwith, and concerning which we need not trouble the reader at present. That matter off his mind, he devoted himself, with no very great success, to the ladies under his escort, but their sad faces were not easy to brighten, and with every mile forward there was the deepening consciousness that they were approaching more closely the shadow-land wherein poor Dick Eston was waiting for them patiently.

It was a tedious and miserable journey; it seemed as though it would never end to the two women and the thoughtful sailor by their side; but the end came at last, and late at night the engine, clanking and puffing like a monster tired out with its efforts, dragged slowly its burden into the terminus of the South-Western railway.

"And this is London?" said Sissie Eston wonderingly; "how dark and dirty it seems."

"This part of it is not very cheerful, certainly ; we shall find more life in the Highway, such as it is," he added.

"And we are going——"

"To my home, after all," said James Strahan. "It's a poor one, but you will be safe there, with me to look after you. It's the only place I know where you would be safe. London is a strange place to me now, and I'm not at home in it myself."

A cab procured, and the little luggage which Miss Eston and her maid had brought with them placed upon the roof, and then they set out on the last stage of their journey. It was a dark night with the rain and the wind in the London streets as the cab stopped in Peter's Row, and the inhabitants, ever curious, came to their doors or stood out on the wet pavement to note the new arrivals. A cab in Peter's Row was something of a curiosity, and a cab at old Strahan's house was an incident still more remarkable. Old Strahan had evidently "overdone" it at last, and fallen downstairs and broken something, and was now going comfortably off to the hospital, was the popular idea, till a sailor and two ladies emerged from the vehicle.

"Hollo! here's sailor Jem gone and got married," cried one.

"And to a couple on 'em, too, the Mormon," said another.

"That stout one's fat enuf for a show," observed a third, very critically.

"I s'pose it's some more of the family turned up."

"As if there wasn't enuf of the Strahan lot in our street already," was the last comment which reached the ears of the travellers as they passed into the house and entered the front room, where James Strahan had sat last night disconsolately. Here were two men waiting to receive them, and Sissie Eston half turned to our hero as if for explanation or introduction.

It was the latter which James Strahan offered.

"This is my father," he said, "and this my brother Victor. How do you do, Vic—I'm pleased to see you, lad."

"Thank you, Jemmy," was the reply, as the two men shook hands, "and I'm glad to see you home at last." Then Victor Strahan bowed to the ladies, set chairs for them—brand-new cane-bottomed chairs they were too—and went back to his place by the mantelpiece, whilst his father rose, made a polite bow, muttered that they were very welcome, and that any friend of his son's he was always very charmed to see, and then sat down again, with care and a little difficulty.

James Strahan eyed him narrowly, but said nothing, and for a few moments there was a strange silence in that little room, where four persons had foregathered whose lives were to cross each other and influence each other from that night. Sissie Eston was an observant girl, one of those of whom it is said they observe without being observed. In a fleeting moment she had noticed these two men to whom she had been introduced and been struck with the difference between them. They were father and son, she knew; James Strahan had already spoken of them to her, or without his assurance she could not have believed it. The father was a new character to her, and she inwardly shrank from him, as at a social leper who was horrible in his aspect to her. Dirty and palsy-stricken, with grey hair matted about his head and trailing in wiry streaks before his eyes, he was a shambling half-drunken shadow of a man; a reflex of the hundreds one sees at public-house counters, or reeling through the streets of London, helpless and degraded atoms of our poor humanity—and this was James Strahan's father. This was as James Strahan's father had been for many profitless years of his life; a man past all hope and past all praying for, people said who knew anything about him. It was an awful verdict to pass on

any man, but his sons almost acquiesced in it, and there was no one in the world with any faith in him. Old Strahan knew that, and constituted it as one of his secret grievances—being a man of many grievances, one who had suffered from much terrible injustice, and who never, *never* could get enough to drink!

And James Strahan's brother? As he stood there he seemed the most incongruous figure of them all, the one most out of place with Peter's Row and its surroundings—a dandy dropped from Bond Street, "a West-End swell" transplanted from his club, as Hassan of the legend was whirled by giant hands from Cairo to Damascus, and set down in this poor little home, down a back street in St. George's-in-the-East. He was not in tone with the picture—its neutral tints and he did not assimilate.

Victor Strahan was taller than his brother James, and some seven years his junior. He was a stalwart, handsome young fellow of six-and-twenty, fair-haired and blue-eyed, with a face that seemed laughing at the world or the world's cares, as though its owner had long ago surmounted them or defied them. Something of the resolution of the elder brother, too, seemed stamped in the broad forehead, which was at variance in character with the chin and mouth, though their weakness

of outline was fairly disguised by a short flaxen beard, and a heavy fair moustache which draped the upper lip. He was well dressed, too expensively and fashionably dressed for Peter's Row, and would have looked less showy, perhaps more "like the gentleman," without his eighteen-carat gold chain, though he did not display much of it, and his diamond breast-pin, of which he displayed a great deal.

"You got my telegram," said James Strahan to him.

"Yes ; and I hope have obeyed all your behests," was the reply. "There are the new chairs, Jemmy, and the room upstairs has been refurnished according to your directions."

"Thank you," said his brother. "I will pay you to-morrow."

"I hope you'll wait till I ask you for the money," was the quiet suggestion of the other.

"I will settle with you to-morrow," reiterated his brother.

"All right. So be it, then," answered Victor easily.

"There is one thing you have not done, Vic," said James Strahan, looking from his brother to his father and back again. Victor coloured, laughed a little, and shrugged his shoulders.

"No, upon my honour, I couldn't do that." re-

plied Victor. "I gave him a hint, but he did not understand it, and I—I thought you might alter your mind before the day was out."

"Am I in the habit of altering my mind?" was the quick inquiry.

"Well, I can't say you are," and Victor Strahan attempted a forced laugh again. James Strahan turned to Sissie Eston.

"I wanted to make this place for you a something like home, Miss Eston; at all events, a house wherein you could rest with your great sorrow for a while," he said; "and I have done my best to do so—at a moment's notice—for Dick's sake as well as your own. I said that this poor weak fellow was to go away, to clear out whilst you were here, and," his hand fell heavily on the shoulder of his father, "he must go at once."

Mr. Strahan, senior, cowered in his chair, and looked up with a piteous expression in his blood-shot eyes.

"Don't send me away, James, don't be too hard on the old man," he whimpered; "I won't make any noise—I'll do just as you tell me, I will indeed."

"Then I tell you to put on your hat and leave us."

"It's very late."

"Not for you."

"It's very wet."

"You will find my pilot coat behind the door."

Sissie Eston rose quickly. The sternness of James Strahan, his singular absence of any filial sentiment, had shocked and surprised her.

"No, no, Mr. Strahan," she said, "your father shall not be turned out of his own house to make room for me."

"Your pardon, but it is my house, and——"

"And he has been an inmate of it too long to be disturbed. You must let me go away again and seek a shelter for myself. I would prefer it now."

"There's plenty of room, young lady, heaps of room for all of us," said Mr. Strahan, senior.

"It is not a question of room," his son James remarked, "but of my father's absence being necessary. If I were not very sure of this I would not send him from us. I spare his feelings as well as your own when I say his way lies there," he added, pointing to the street.

"Not with my consent," said Miss Eston, rising ; "my way rather than his, James Strahan."

"He is—I do not pain him much by the assertion, I think," James said, looking at his father grimly—"an incorrigible drunkard."

"He is your father," answered Sissie, gravely, "and you appear to have forgotten it."

"On the contrary," said the sailor, very gravely too, "it is burnt into my heart in letters of fire—it is my cross and my shame!"

"That's how he goes on always—my eldest boy too, and the apple of my eye," said Strahan, senior; "seldom a kind word, and never a spare sixpence. If it wasn't for my own exertions and for my friends——"

"That'll do, father," said Victor, interrupting him, "keep quiet. I think the lady pleads your cause the best."

"*You* do not see the necessity of his going away?" said Sissie to the younger brother.

"Well—hardly," he replied in a hesitating manner. "I think Jemmy is a trifle too hard—expects too much, and exacts too much. After all, he *is* our father, as Miss Eston says, Jem."

"Well, take him back with you."

"Oh, good gracious! No, I couldn't do that," said the other with alacrity. "You see——"

"Yes, I see," said his brother dryly. "Miss Eston, he shall stop here as you wish."

"I was sure you would alter your mind," said Sissie, offering her hand to him; "thank you."

"You have nothing to thank me for," he answered.

"At least, you have let me have my own way."

"Yes," replied James, moodily; "oh, yes! you have had that."

"I think ladies generally get it," said Victor lightly. He laughed pleasantly at his own remark; he had forgotten what sad hearts were near him, and on what sad mission they were there.

"I do not see anything to laugh at," said his brother, "even if these were laughing times for us, which they are not."

"I beg pardon; I had forgotten," replied Victor.

Thus it was arranged that Strahan, senior, should not be turned out of house and home to make room for Sissie Eston, and the elder son felt that she and his brother had got the better of him. He gave in with a bad grace, hardly like a man convinced that he had been in the wrong. The heavy, moody expression, as of a man aggrieved, settled on his face, unless the fatigue of his double journey was telling on him now.

"I shall see you to-morrow, Victor," he said, by way of hint to his brother; "and for all you have done for me to-day, I thank you."

"Oh! it's no trouble."

"I shall have plenty to tell you soon. Will you take the parrot with you now?"

"No, thank you. I'll get you to send that."

"I will."

"Good-night, then. Good-night, father"—and Victor added, in a low voice, "try and get on with Jem better. Make an effort and do as he wishes you ; you know how good a fellow he is at heart."

"Good fellows haven't the temper of a fiend, Victor," whispered the father back ; "he is wearing me to death."

"Good-night, Miss Eston," said Victor, turning to her ; "I hope we shall meet again soon. Let me thank you," he added, in a low voice again, "for speaking up for the old man. You have done good already here."

"I—I hope so," added Sissie Eston, doubtfully.

James Strahan saw his brother to the street door, and, after a few words in the narrow passage, returned to the parlour.

"You will find refreshment in your room," he said to Sissie, "you will be glad to get away from us now. You are looking ill, poor girl."

"I am only tired. Good night."

"Good-night," said James Strahan, taking the proffered hand and bowing over it.

"You are not cross with me for taking your father's part ?" she asked.

"No," he answered, "but——"

"But ?" she repeated, interrogatively.

"But it was a great mistake."

"I don't see——"

"Ah! because you don't know," he added bluntly. "There, good-night, Dick's sister, and good night, Polly—take care of your mistress."

Sissie and her maid departed, and James Strahan soon followed their example. He went first to his father's side and looked at him attentively. Mr. Strahan, senior, was asleep, or feigning sleep, and as if it were better policy not to disturb him, the son cautiously withdrew and left him huddled in his chair.

When the house was still, however, Mr. Strahan sat up and listened, rose and went on tiptoe to the foot of the staircase and listened again, returned and locked the door of the front room and put out the light, leaving himself in darkness. This done, he drew up the blind, raised the window softly, thrust his head out and looked up and down the street. Somebody approached him after he had indulged in a low, long whistle, and a husky voice said—

"What a time you have kept me waiting."

CHAPTER IX.

THE INQUEST.

THE nature of that midnight conversation between Mr. Strahan, senior, and the husky being in the street without it is not our purpose to dwell upon at present. Suffice it to say that it was a long and earnest dialogue, made under most uncomfortable circumstances, and that when Mr. Strahan closed the window—and the interview—the waistcoat and shirt covering his manly chest were wet through with drifting rain. It had been a conversation of some moment, and ere our story ends we shall know more concerning it. It disturbed the rest of Mr. Strahan, who shuffled in the darkness from his bedroom to the back parlour, and from the back parlour to his bedroom, in a wild-beast fashion, until, tired out with his perambulations, he flung himself, dressed as he was, upon his bed, and slept heavily till morning. At an early hour, even before his breakfast, he had left Peter's Row ; important business, he stated, necessitating his getting early to work. He was drinking rum at the bar of "Paddy's Goose" at nine in the

morning, but that was part of his work possibly. Strahan was very fond of rum, and the earlier he took it, he solemnly assured his friends, the better he felt for the rest of the day,

At all events, he did not trouble home much, and his son James was very much obliged to him. He said so, even, with a short forced laugh, to his guests, and Sissie Eston once more looked gravely at him and marvelled at his callousness.

"I know what is on your mind, Miss Eston," he said, as he noted her expression; "that I do not honour my father, and that I am a hard-hearted wretch without much pity in my disposition, Well, I have been told so before."

"I do not say so," answered Sissie. "I see only that you are lacking in that love of son for father which most sons have, I think, under any circumstances."

"Under any circumstances!" he echoed ironically.

"Your own brother thinks, even, that you are too harsh with him."

"'My own brother' is a very good-tempered man, a clever fellow, and a good fellow; but he had no right to say that last night, and before you. He did me an injustice," he said, his broad forehead furrowing.

"You are quick to take offence," said Sissie; "are you not?"

"Well," he added, with a shrug of his shoulders, "I'm not the most amiable man in all the world. But I bear no ill-will against Victor ; he does not always mean what he says. I'm proud of him, too ; I took him away from here, long before mother died, clean out of harm's way, and slaved for him more than he has ever guessed, and got him a berth, when he was a mere lad, which has led him on to fortune. Five hundred a year *is* a fortune to a single man like him: I never earned it myself—I don't suppose I ever shall. But," he said, with a bright look on his face, "I got it for him, and I don't mind. And," he added, with a wry expression at the corners of his mouth, at which Sissie could have smiled on a less serious occasion, "if you ever met a more conceited, puffed-out ignoramus than I am, Miss Eston, I should like to see him as a curiosity some day."

"You have been a good brother and friend ; I cannot think you have been a bad son," said Sissie, thoughtfully.


"Thank you," said James Strahan, gratefully. "I have not, but——"

"But tell me of my brother now, please. You are saying all this to distract my thoughts—you are very kind to me—but it is impossible."

Sissie Eston was right, and James Strahan

thought what a shrewd little woman this was to find him out so readily. He would have kept her mind from dwelling upon the coming trials of that day, but it was beyond his power. They were too close upon the facts now. He gave up and changed the conversation to poor Dick Eston. It was better to face it out, after all.

We can afford to pass over many of the details of this day and of others following it—it will suffice for this history to assert that the inquest on Richard Eston, mariner, was short and decisive, and that a verdict of manslaughter against some person or persons unknown was duly recorded in the official books. That the life of her brother should have been taken thus, and that the whole world did not ring with the horror and the heinousness of the offence was a matter of wonderment to this simple Devonshire girl, who knew not that, in a city of four millions, death by violence—by violence born of drink in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred—goes on, day by day, with the regularity of clockwork, the hand of crime for ever moving with an awful certainty across the great white register of Time. People talked of Dick's death for a day or two longer in the Highway—there were a few paragraphs in the newspapers—there were some faint inquiries by the police—but in a fortnight all was forgotten ;



the black river rolled by with fresh victims, and earnest men and women seemed praying almost in vain for myriads of weaklings drifting onwards with the current to their soul's discomfiture.

Praying not only in vain, though, for prayer rises upwards to heaven. Despite the temptations of the gin-palaces, and for all the grim stories in our newspapers, there are some poor drowning souls crying out for help still, and seizing the outstretched hands of those upon the banks. Dark may be the night, but the stars shine.

CHAPTER X.

SETTLING DOWN.

SISSIE Eston did not go back to Tentercombe after the funeral of her brother ; there was much to do in town in the way of administering to his effects, and when all was completed—which was in the late autumn time—the inclination to return to Devonshire was not very strong upon her.

There seemed a reason for remaining to her. She was doing good here, just as Victor Strahan had prophesied she would ; the rugged character of the elder brother was softening and becoming amenable to the feminine interest displayed in him ; he was less harsh to his father ; even made another effort, in conjunction with Sissie, to reform that gentleman, which, as it proved a complete failure, it is hardly necessary to dwell upon, save that it established a common interest, a mutual sympathy, between James Strahan and “Dick’s sister,” as he was fond of terming her.

By this time, James Strahan had settled down to a new life. He had found occupation with his late employers, large shipowners, who had had

their eyes on this steady matter-of-fact business sailor for some time, and for whom promotion as first mate was preparing when he announced his intention of giving up the sea. It was found that James Strahan could look after their interests on shore, and, a post being vacant, our hero stepped into it, and as an overlooker, or inspector of their vessels in the docks, or their ships coming from abroad, he was in a situation to a certain extent congenial to his tastes and profitable to himself and his employers. He was an honest energetic man and his principals had had a difficulty in discovering one. He was a temperance man, too; and he who is a sworn enemy to drink stands always the better chance in the world's fight. It was not necessary to abide in the dingy precincts of Peter's Row any longer, although James Strahan's occupation did not allow him to leave wholly the locality.

There was a little house in a terrace of private houses in the Commercial Road East, to which James Strahan moved his father and his worldly goods, and the first floor of which he let to Miss Eston and her maid for a time, and till they had made up their minds what to do. The furniture came from Devonshire, and the cottage on the slope was given up for good. Sissie had considerable talent in making lace—a Devonshire

lass's natural gift almost—and she found it was possible to keep herself and maid in busy London by the work of her own hands. There was a small annual income of her own, too, which rendered her not wholly dependent on her labours.

“I did not think you would care for London after so long a stay in Devonshire,” James Strahan said to her one day.

“There is life here, and I have a hope, an ambitious one, perhaps, that I may be of service in its midst.”

“In what way?”

“Oh! in my own little way,” she said smiling. “I will tell you when I have arranged my plans more clearly. Perhaps you can help me?”

“Very willingly, Dick's sister,” he answered with alacrity.

Meanwhile the plans were formed slowly, and time went on, until Sissie Eston called the great city “home.” For her own little rooms in the first floor of James Strahan's house became a peaceful, pleasant home to her, and James Strahan did not trouble her too much with his company. He was a shy man so far as these women-folk were concerned, and quick enough—probably too quick—to fancy himself in the way. There grew gradually upon him, also, an embarrassment in his manner of addressing Sissie Eston, which was

a little remarkable in one who was at times so terribly outspoken—meeting her suddenly, in the street even, he would blush and stammer painfully, until her own self-possession led him to regain his own.

As this is not a three-volume novel, we may precipitate matters by stating frankly what the acute reader has already perceived for himself—that James Strahan was falling in love with Dick's sister—that before Christmas-time he was "head over heels" in love with her, and half disposed to be ashamed of himself for giving way to the tender passion at what he termed "his time of life."

He did not know what to make of it; he had not been in love before, or known what love was; he had never met the woman who had had the power to touch his heart till this day, and he did not believe that it would be in *his* power to move any woman's heart towards him. He was morose and disagreeable, people thought; he made few friends; he made a great many enemies by his blunt speech, his temperance advocacy, a habit he had at times of presenting a tract as though it were a pistol, and he demanded your reformation or your life, even, he confessed, by his want of charity towards men more liable to err than he was. Truly James Strahan was a strong-minded being, without much

consideration for those who had not his own strength of will ; he judged others by his own standard, and was an egotist after an odd moral fashion which set him in a false light and turned men's hearts against him very often. He was conscious of this to an extent, and it grieved him, but he did not alter his ways much to anyone save to the fair girl in mourning whom he had brought from Devonshire to brighten his home. To her he was a different being altogether, and she did not understand him at first, and then began to fear that she understood him far too well. It is symbolical of the simple nature of our hero that, in his nervousness and shyness as regarded Sissie Eston, and in his own want of confidence in his fitness to make a good husband to her, even were she disposed to accept him, this late second mate of *The Rover* thought that he would step over to his brother's chambers in Danes' Inn and take Victor's advice upon the matter. He was not in the habit of asking any one's advice as a rule ; of his own soundness of judgment in most things he was a trifle vain, perhaps ; but in affairs of the heart, to a fellow who had only just discovered that he had got a heart, he was a very baby. And his brother Victor was one who had seen the world, mixed a great deal in society, knew a heap of ladies and gentlemen—was, in fact,

quite a lady's man, and at his best in the society of a sex from which he, James Strahan, had scrupulously held aloof. James did not know, even, that on any other subject than this, save tea-tasting, he would have valued his brother's opinion a brass farthing, but he thought he could not be wrong in procuring a little information from him as to the right method of courtship, and the proper way of addressing her who, he felt, was influencing his life very seriously now.

With this resolution he started westward one evening in search of Victor Strahan.

CHAPTER XL.

IN SEARCH OF ADVICE.

VICTOR STRAHAN was at home. His brother James had hardly hoped for so much good fortune ; but the door on the first floor opened to his summons, and the tall handsome man whom we have seen at Peter's Row faced him very promptly.

"What, Jamie !" cried Victor, heartily, "come in. It is not often you favour me with your noble company."

As James followed him into his handsomely furnished chambers, he noticed that his brother was wrapped in a thick Ulster coat, and, with his hat on his head, was evidently prepared for departure.

"You are going out ?" he said.

"I was thinking of a stroll in your direction. We will proceed eastwards together when you have rested a few minutes."

"I don't think we will," answered his brother. "I have a lot to say, and I can't say it in the street."

Victor regarded him curiously, even for an

instant, doubtfully ; then he took off his Ulster and his grey silk wrap, stirred the fire, and sat down facing his brother.

"All right, Jamie, we'll make a night of it here, if you like. Sit down," he said ; "there's some claret at your elbow and whisky on the sideboard, and——Oh ! ten thousand pardons, old boy, I had forgotten for a moment you were a temperance man. You see," he added, apologetically, "the men of my set don't drink water."

"Ah ! then, a pretty set they are," was the quick reply ; "take care of them, Vic, they'll lead you into trouble yet, if you don't mind."

"I'll take care," was the easy answer ; "I never was drunk in my life, Jamie, so don't lecture a moderate man as if he were one of the worst of toppers."

"He does as much harm—more, perhaps—for he leads others on, saying, 'See how easy it is to be moderate.' He——"

"Hold hard, Jamie," cried the other. "You haven't come all this way to preach to me, I know. You wouldn't do me such a bad turn as that."

"'Preach !' 'Bad turn !'" cried James, scornfully ; "ah ! you remind me of poor Dick Eston now. Her brother !"

Victor looked critically at him again. The tea-taster was a shrewd man in his way, for he

saw at once an opportunity of turning the conversation."

"And how is Miss Eston, Jamie?"

"She is very well; but——"

"She seems to have settled down in your new house just as if it were her home," he continued.

"It is her home, isn't it?"

"A Devonshire girl loves Devon always," was the answer; "and she will spread her wings and away one of these fine days, Jem."

"How do you know?"

"Well—I've seen her once or twice lately, and she speaks of Devonshire with enthusiasm—presently it will be with regret."

"I hope not. When did you see her last?"

"Yesterday afternoon, I think it was," Victor replied. "I called to see father, and she was reading to him downstairs."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed James. "Bless her heart for the trouble she takes. I'm afraid the listener was not very attentive."

"He was very quiet," said Victor, dryly.

"And why did you not wait till I came home from the Docks?"

"Oh! I had business to do afterwards," said Victor; "it was in my way, Commercial Road, and I thought I would look in and see—father."

"I am glad you look in more frequently than

you used, Vic, although I always miss you," said his brother. "Sissie Eston told me last week that you had called twice. You ran away before I got home though."

"You are home so late, and in the evenings I am much engaged," explained Victor—"so many invitations and so many friends."

"Who don't drink water—like mad dogs. And mad dogs they are."

"There are such nasty things in water," said his brother flippantly; "why, at the Polytechnic——"

"Go on," said James, as he stopped short; "let us argue this out."

"Not to-night," answered Victor, "for I'm sure you have important business with me—and if you have discovered the little plot which Sissie Eston and I have been preparing, why I, for one, am sorry you have forestalled us."

"What do you mean by that?" said James Strahan, turned from his subject again and very much surprised.

"Oh! you don't know—you haven't heard yet? Well in good time, Jamie, you shall, but it is Miss Eston's secret and I am not privileged to divulge it."

James Strahan sat bewildered by the information.

"It is news to me, all this," he said, "but if it

is necessary to keep me in the dark, I don't mind."

"We are preparing an agreeable surprise for you. Don't look so black," said Victor, laughingly.

"A secret—Miss Eston's secret—and an agreeable surprise for me!" said James Strahan, his face brightening. "God bless her! she thinks of others all her life, not of herself."

"A dreadfully unselfish woman, certainly."

"Dreadfully! you stupid," cried James, indignant at the misappropriation of his brother's adverbs.

"I don't like women to be always thinking how uncomfortable they can make themselves to benefit the undeserving poor and the ungrateful cadger," was the satirical comment here.

"Ah! you don't disturb me—you never mean what you say," said his brother. "You think it is a fine thing to disguise the good that is in you. But as a scoffer, Vic, you're an utter failure."

Victor laughed and displayed a set of teeth of which many women might have been proud.

"Now to business," he said presently; "what is it about, Jamie? Can I lend you any money?"

"No, you can't. Hang your money—you're always wanting to pitch it away. I have come to talk about Sissie Eston."

"Oh!—indeed."

"I haven't a great idea of your wisdom, Vic," said his straightforward brother, "but I think you can advise me what to do now. You are an easy 'go-ahead' cool customer, and you have some knowledge of a lady's ways and manners. You will marry your master's daughter, I dare say—Miss Bocker, isn't she called?—and end your career like Dick Whittington."

"With a cat! No, Jamie, I shall not marry Miss Bocker."

"Why, I have heard you say——"

"Ay, no matter what you have heard me say," he repeated quickly. "Miss Bocker belongs to the past, where let her screech."

"You don't mean to tell me——"

"Now, what is this concerning Miss Eston?" Victor interrupted. "What has she done? Who has come after her? Not the limp curate with the hare-lip—not anybody yet, Jamie, is it?"

"Everybody seems to like her, and she'll be snapped up, if she has a mind to marry, pretty soon," answered James Strahan; "and so I think of speaking out very plainly and to the purpose—and at once. Only—only, Vic, how on earth ought a fellow to begin?"

He did not look up to his brother with his usual bright unflinching eyes; he was embarrassed strangely; he sat before the fire with one hand

clutching his brown beard and his head bent somewhat low, or he would have seen all the colour vanish from Victor's face and leave him for an instant white and ghastly.

"Do I understand," said Victor at last, in a deep tone, "that you are in love with Sissie Eston?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I have told you first of all, Vic."

"In love with her! Really in love! You?"

"Ay—with all the strength of a man's honest heart, Vic," said James.

He looked up now, but the colour had returned to his brother's face and Victor was calmly lighting a cigarette.

CHAPTER XII.

VICTOR'S ADVICE.

"YOU are about the last man I should have put down for a victim," said young Strahan, very coolly.

"A victim to what?" was the quick inquiry.

"To the tender passion, Jamie."

"Tender fiddlesticks," answered his brother.

"You do not regard this from a sentimental point of view, then? Are you quite sure it is love?—or you know what love is?" Victor asked, almost anxiously.

"I am quite sure, Vic, I could lie down and die for Sissie Eston," he replied—"that she is, or seems to me, a something so different from other women, so true-hearted a girl, so good a young woman, full of thought for others, and with no consideration for her own dear self, that—that I can't think of anything else but how to make her life a happy one."

"By marrying you, Jamie—that is the only way, I suppose?"

Jamie looked at his brother again, as if his quick

ear had caught the faintest ring of satire in the tone of voice ; but Victor regarded him with an unflinching gaze, and smoked on calmly.

"I think she might be happy with me," the elder brother remarked a little doubtfully. "I don't see what is to hinder it. Do you?" he added, as there was an awkward pause here.

"I can't tell," answered Victor hurriedly ; "as I have just said, you are the last man whom I should have credited with thoughts of marriage."

"Why?"

"Well, you have odd notions upon most subjects," was the explanation proffered—"are proud of your own opinion, and not too deferential to the opinions of others—and, in fact, Jamie, are very fond of your own way, and a trifle cross when you don't get it."

Victor laughed lightly at his own criticism, and at the thoughtful expression on his brother's countenance.

"I don't say you are wrong there, Victor," James remarked.

"And as a woman likes her own way, and in the long run will generally have it, the question is how will James Strahan stand it?"

"There is not a wish of hers I should not be proud to fulfil ; she is always in the right, you see, Vic. She is——"

"Yes, yes, you are very much gone to own that," Victor interrupted,—“that will do. Let us change the subject.”

“Change the subject!” echoed his brother. “Bless my heart, why I have only just commenced. You have not answered my question, how I am to set about this courting business? What shall I say or do to begin with?”

“It is an odd thing to ask me,” murmured Victor.

“Not at all. You have been in love. I haven’t. You have said to Miss Bocker——”

“For mercy’s sake, man, keep Miss Bocker out of the argument,” cried Victor. “I was a vain young fool—a mercenary young fool, if you will—when I thought of becoming engaged to her; and as for love, I never dreamed of it and my master’s daughter together.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” said his brother; “I thought better of you than to fancy you would pretend to care for a woman.”

“I was thinking of my master’s money-bags,” Victor continued, with increasing bitterness—“of a partnership, and so forth. I was for sale, Jamie, and she was thirty-five, and as ugly as sin. But I have repented—‘sworn off.’”

“It’s as well, certainly,” said James; “and now, how would you begin with any one you *were* really

in love with—doubtful, mind you, at the same time, if she cared for you a bit?"

"She doesn't care for you, then?" was the sudden inquiry.

"I don't know," said James. "She is very kind—and very gentle—that's all. But she seems now and then to be half afraid of me. I suppose that's shyness."

"Very likely."

"Was Miss Bocker shy at first when—— I beg pardon, Vic—that's off."

"Yes, very much off."

"Well—how would you act in my place?"

"In your place—why, naturally, and after your usual fashion, straightforwardly," answered Victor. "You have always spoken out your thoughts, and you have kept nothing back, at any cost. Speak out now, and get it over."

"That's exactly my idea," said James, "only I don't see how to begin."

"Watch your opportunity; it will not be long in coming."

"N—no—perhaps not."

"And if she does not care for you, why the sooner you know it the better," concluded Victor.

"And if she does?"

"Why, the quicker begins the happiness of James Strahan."

"Exactly," said the elder brother, suddenly rising; "so wish me luck. I shall out with the whole truth to-night, as soon as I get home."

"That's sharp work, at any rate," said Victor, dropping his cigarette into the fireplace. "I don't recommend such undue haste as that."

"Leave it to me, and," James added, for the second time, and with both hands outstretched, "wish me success in my wooing, Vic—for all the peace of my life depends upon my getting her."

Victor placed his hands in his brother's, but did not look at him, as he said, "I wish you every success in life, Jamie—every happiness—everywhere."

"That means with Sissie—many thanks. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"I shall see you soon. I may come again to-night even, and let you know the news."

"Thank you."

Victor did not ask his brother to remain any longer with him; on the contrary, he seemed relieved when James Strahan had gone, and he dropped into the chair before the fire with a strange half-sigh, half-groan. There was not much time for the deep reflection to which he was about to resign himself, for there came a lively

summons on the little brass knocker of his door, within a couple of minutes after his brother's departure. He rose with an exclamation of annoyance at the interruption, and opened the door to admit a well-dressed gentleman of his own age, who stepped quickly into the room with the ease and familiarity of a man sure of his welcome.

"I thought I would look you up to-night, Victor — any cards presently? — any fellows coming round?"

"I cannot say," was the listless answer. "Very likely."

"Who's the rough-looking customer, all beard and pilot coat, I met on the stairs?" asked the new-comer. "A bold smuggler doing business in brandy?"

"The rough-looking customer is my brother," said Victor, sharply.

"Oh, I beg pardon! — I was not aware of that, of course. No offence, Vic."

"Oh! no offence," said the other, carelessly now; "but he's a good fellow, and the man who speaks against him is no friend of mine. I wish to Heaven I had half his goodness and firmness — half his courage — his knowledge."

"His knowledge, eh?" exclaimed the other. "Is he a great scholar then?"

"His knowledge of what is right, Ashford ; a science in which you and I are lamentably deficient. Here, let me have something to drink. Pass that decanter."

"Something has put you out, old man, to-night. What is it?"

"What you will never know," Victor answered with a short laugh, as he filled his glass ; "and what you would never understand, if you did."

He tossed off his wine recklessly ; for a fleeting instant he looked not unlike his father standing at the bar of "Paddy's Goose"—the shadow seemed to fall on him, as if cast by the great dark wings of the drink fiend.

Victor was laughing heartily the next minute. Within the next half-hour there were five visitors to his chambers, and he was the merriest of the community—a being full of life, animal spirits, repartee—even a trifle "wildish" in his pleasant jesting. A man everybody liked ; it was evident ; a free-handed, free-hearted, good-tempered fellow, always glad to see everybody, making many friends at every step of his prosperous career, and having only one enemy in himself, though he was not aware of that fact at present. A generous soul enough—but, alas, with a black speck in it !

CHAPTER XIII.

JAMIE WOULD A WOON' GO.

WHEN James Strahan was striding homewards he wondered not a little at the small amount of advice he had obtained from his brother. He had been told to go lovemaking in a straightforward fashion, and it was what he had made up his mind to do from the first. What wise counsel was there in that? But of the art of courtship he knew nothing more than when he had set out—and his brother, who he thought had been engaged, or as good as engaged, to Miss Bocker, had not imparted to him one scrap of information, based on the love matters in which he had been assuredly concerned. But, after all, Victor had not been in love with Miss Bocker—he had honestly confessed that—and therefore had had no real experience. He, James Strahan, must proceed after his own fashion, and perhaps for the best. It was no use learning “company manners” in order to win the affection of Sissie Eston; she would see through him in a moment. She was too clever a girl to be won by any arts or affectations

if they had been even in his line, which they were not.

He was before his home in the Commercial Road again by nine in the evening, and, as luck would have it—good luck or bad luck, which was it?—Polly Mavis, Sissie's maid-servant, was standing at the door, bare-headed, just as if it were a warm summer's evening, and a breath of fresh air were necessary after the heat of the day.

"Where's your mistress?" he said, so suddenly and sharply, as he strode up the steps, that Polly, taken off her guard, slipped off the top step in dismay.

"Bless us all—what are you bawling about?" said she, when she had recovered from her alarm, and was her own matter-of-fact and hardly too civil self.

"Where's Miss Eston, Polly? I wish to see her on particular business.

"No more bad news, I hope," said Polly, suspiciously; "you coom first with bad news to Devonshire, mon, and I've always been skeared at you since."

"Have you?" said James. "I am sorry for that."

"And somehow you've stuck us in these dirty streets: there seems no getting back to Tentercombe again, and I don't like you for that, Muster Strahan."

James Strahan laughed. He was in a pleasant

mood, and Polly Mavis was a young woman to conciliate, if possible.

"That's hard on me, Polly," he said, "and you must not blame me for everything. What's Miss Sissie doing to-night?"

"Oh! scribbling away as usual," said Polly, contemptuously.

It was evident that Polly was not in a pleasant mood, if James Strahan were.

"Scribbling?" exclaimed James.

"Yes; all kinds of papers and letters—a wearyin' and worryin' herself for nothin', bless her silly heart. Thank goodness," she added, devoutly, "I never larnt to write—or read, for that matter. It's saved me a deal, that has!"

"Wise Polly," said James; "and now ask Miss Sissie if she can spare me a few moments' conversation."

"I don't see, Muster Strahan, why you can't ask her yourself. You know how trying them stairs be to my breath by this toime, surely?"

"Quite right, Polly; so I will."

James Strahan passed her, and went upstairs, two steps at a time, with great alacrity. Having made up his mind, it was as if there was not a minute to be lost now—or as if some terrible rival and he were racing for her and the first comer had the better chance.

After he had knocked at the door—or rather hammered at the panels—with a big, firm hand, he felt suddenly and unaccountably nervous, and when Sissie Eston opened it and regarded him with some surprise, his power of speech deserted him for a while.

"What is the matter?" asked Sissie, anxiously. "Is—is that you, Mr. James?"

James Strahan nodded.

"Something has happened. Some——"

"No; nothing has happened," said James Strahan, finding his voice at last. "Don't look so scared, Miss Eston. I—I heard from Polly you were at home, and I thought you might spare me a few moments."

"Certainly. Come in."

Sissie Eston stepped back, and James Strahan followed her into the room very slowly and awkwardly, and feeling very much like a man going to be hanged. His courage had entirely deserted him, and the consciousness of having begun badly was not tending to reassure him. He should surprise her as he had Victor, and with a more deplorable result. He always spoke out at the wrong time and in the wrong place. It was part of his nature to blunder, and here he was, going to make a terrible mess of it now, and no mistake!

Sissie Eston sat down at the table—which was heaped with papers of all sorts and sizes—and indicated a chair by the fireside for her visitor, after first glancing at him with a pair of quickly-flashing, lustrous eyes, in which there was an expression of half doubt, half fear, even a consciousness of the nature of his errand possibly, inspired by the intuitive perception, which young women seem to have, as by a miracle, in cases of this kind.

At all events she was very quick to speak, and not to the purpose. There was not much chance of getting a word in edgeways, James Strahan began to think presently. Never in all his life had it struck him before that Sissie Eston was so marvellously loquacious.

"I have been very busy, you see," she said, speaking with great rapidity; "and I suppose you have heard something about it, and have come to scold me for keeping you in the dark so long. But——"

"I scold you for——"

"But it was my own pet project, and I was anxious to carry it out almost to its completion, and as a little bit of surprise to you," she continued at the same rapid pace, "although I knew you would hear of it before our plans had gone much further."

"Yes! Victor told me something of this, and——"

"Victor and I have been laughing at the great surprise it would be to you," she went on again; "although I told Victor that you might look at it in a different light, and wonder why we had not consulted you before, and feel a little angry with us even for working on so quietly. But——"

"Yes, never mind the plans now. I——"

"But, of course," she dashed on again, "we should have required your counsel when it came to active business, and a something more than letter writing—'begging-letter writing' your brother calls it—for, with your experience of the working classes, it would not have done to proceed much further without you."

"Tell me all about this to-morrow, Dick's sister. For——"

"No, you have found me out, and I must confess in full," she replied. "It's a working-man's club that is to be instituted in this neighbourhood—a real club, on temperance principles, too, and where our poorer brethren shall be able to find shelter, and warmth, and amusement, out of the gin palace. I will tell you the whole facts now."

"No, please don't," said James Strahan; "to-morrow I will be glad to hear it all—awfully glad—to offer my little scrap of advice, to wonder at you and Victor, especially old Vic, taking this up and keeping it dark, lest I should interfere with

my crotchets before you had got matters ship-shape. Yes, yes, all this to-morrow, Sissie Eston, not to-night."

Sissie was silenced at last. She had fought against what was coming long enough; but there was no turning the current of this man's ideas when he was in earnest, and she should have known that by this time. Her heart was beating very fast now; the look upon his face told of urgent business, and of his great deep love for her. He had made up his mind; he had conquered his reserve; and Sissie's garrulity had only given him time to put his story into words. That they were strange words to her, and deceived her at that time, was not James Strahan's fault.

"Victor and I have been talking about you this evening, Dick's sister," he began, and Sissie turned very pale, and felt that her breath came short and quick.

"You—and Victor?" she murmured with surprise.

"Yes, both of us together, and about you, as I have said."

"It's a pity you had not something better to talk about," she answered, lightly now, almost pertly.

"Nothing better, there could be nothing better," he added, with what would have seemed gallantry, without those grave and troubled looks of his. "I

had gone expressly to Victor to talk of you, and to ask even his advice, if he had any to give me. Ar'n't you well?"

"Quite well—go on," she said; "let me understand you, if I can. Tell me what right you and he had to call my name in question?"

James Strahan was astonished at her peremptory tone, and the flush upon her cheek, though very beautiful, was singularly significant of anger at her throbbing heart. He hastened to explain—to know the worst, or best at once.

"I—I think you misunderstand me," said he. "We were not talking over anything you had said or done; that was not very likely, for we both think too highly of you and value you too much. The fact is, Dick's sister, I want you to consider if I am a man fit to make you a good husband—some day or other, that is—and if you can believe in time that it is just possible to like me. For I love you so very much, Sissie, that I shall never be the same man again, if you say 'No' to me to-night."

Sissie Eston put her hands before her face, which she hid from him for awhile, for so long a time that the position became embarrassing and painful. He could see the hands were trembling, and he was almost sure that there were hot, bright tears behind them. He did not care to break the silence, though it was hardly a good

omen. He had been unprepared for this method of receiving his avowal even, and it distressed him seriously.

He spoke at last, and with great hesitation.

"There, I have frightened you," he said, sadly.

"No, no; give me time," she answered, very quickly, in return. "Don't talk to me just yet."

There was another painful silence. Then the hands were lowered from her face, and she was looking at him very steadily and with eyes undimmed.

"You and your brother together talked of this to-night?" she asked. "Did I understand you to say this, or did I dream it all?"

"Yes; we talked it over."

"And—what did he advise?"

"That I should come to you at once," replied James Strahan, "and speak out straightforwardly all that was in my heart. Which I hope I have done."

"Very straightforwardly — oh, yes!" she said, almost ironically.

"And crushed you down by my hard truths," he added; "as if I could have expected you to care for such a rough fellow as I am. As if I couldn't have spared you this."

She did not seem to listen, even to understand his outburst of self-depreciation; she sat, with

fingers interlaced, looking intently now at the papers on the table. When he had finished she spoke again.

"And what else did he say?"

"Who—Victor?"

"Yes."

"He wished me every success, of course."

The colour died out of her face very slowly, and returned no more that night.

"Did he?" she answered, in a low voice.

CHAPTER XIV.

PERSUASION.

JAMES STRAHAN did not feel sanguine as to the success of his wooing after Sissie Eston had turned so deathly white. She looked very sad even, unless he was mistaken in his judgment, which he was likely to be, women having always been an enigma to him.

He went on with his love-suit very earnestly, however. The ice was broken, and surely it would not be difficult to know the worst or best that night. With a rough eloquence that astonished his fair listener in calmer moments for reflection, he pleaded his suit, and there was no evading the plain question which he put to her. Here was a truth to face for both these honest folk, and they had never known the truth to be so great an ordeal before. One did not know it till long afterwards.

"I have taken you by surprise—scared you, as it were," Jamie continued, "and any other fellow would have given you time to think this over. But it was as well to speak out—and if you hate

me, why it's as well that you should say so, once for all."

"I am not likely to say that," Sissie murmured; "but, oh! don't think——"

"And I don't suppose," he added, with a wistful look towards her, "that you are likely to love me very much, now I burst out with a bang, and tell you all that's in my heart. I know I'm rough and passionate—unfeeling, many people say, my own father for one of *them*; but I know, too, that I shall be a miserable and downcast wretch, if you can't give me any hope."

"You are not a man to give way," she whispered, wonderingly; "you are firm and strong-minded—always."

"So they say—and think," answered Jamie, thoughtfully; "and I have thought so myself, more than once; but perhaps it is not a disappointment like this which would turn me into a bad man—only into one that, having set his heart upon a prize, would, in losing it, never look up again. That's all."

There was something very touching in this man's strange way of pleading—he was so humble in his earnestness, and he had expressed few wishes of his own in the course of his life. Sissie Eston was impressed, but she was also afraid.

"You would not have me pretend to love you, James?" she said.

"No, no—God forbid!" he answered. "You have not been thinking of me, day by day, hour by hour, as I have been thinking of you—I'm sure of that. You have not been thinking at all, I daresay; it has not seemed natural that old Jemmy Strahan should fall in love—and so you've had no warning. But I only want you——"

He stopped; and Sissie Eston looked up at him eagerly—as one condemned might do who was suddenly hopeful of reprieve.

"Well?" she said.

"I only want you," he repeated, slowly, "to give me a chance—to hold out a hope—to promise to consider this in the best light, and in the course of time—to give me a trial, as it were, and see if I'm worth thinking of as a sweetheart. I'm not badly off," he added, suddenly arriving at the determination to trot out a few of his good traits; "I'm in a good berth, which may be better presently—I'm a temperance man—I'm honest and faithful, I know—I'm a Christian, I think."

Still Sissie Eston did not respond in any way. She was not looking at him now; her eyes were fixed on the carpet, and the fingers were once more interlaced, even wrung together, as though there were an acute pain at her heart. Self-laudation

had not done much more for James Strahan's suit than self-depreciation.

"And as for what you can make of me," he added, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm that caused poor Sissie to jump in her chair, "what a hero—what a fellow for work in any good cause you may point out, why, it's wonderful to think of! And Dick would have been so glad to hear of this, had he lived—he liked me in his heart, I'm sure."

"Yes—I'm sure of that. And your brother," she added very timidly, "would be glad of this too. He *has* told you so?"

"Yes. Very glad indeed, for he knows how much I love you, and what a blank life will be if you won't have me."

"Why should it be? What am I but a poor country-girl?"

"You are everything to me," was the answer. "I'm not like a man who is fond of pleasure, and has an army of friends—say, like young Victor, for instance—I'm a man with one idea, and that's you."

Sissie drew a long breath, and then rose as if all had been said in the plaintiff's case, and the verdict was now to be given. She was his judge, and as he rose instinctively to his feet also, he felt his heart thumping with extraordinary violence beneath his waistcoat.

"You must give me time," she said, almost in a whisper. "I have been surprised, as you say—all this is new and strange and bewildering to me. I did not think of you save as a good, kind friend on whom I might rely—it is all very like a dream."

"And you will not say No?" he cried, joyfully.

"I will not say Yes," was the enigmatic answer. "I may never say Yes; but I will think of it deeply, and I will do what is right."

"Why, of course you will," he answered, sturdily; "there, I'm going away happy."

"No—don't believe this is happiness in any way," she said, quickly; "pray don't yet awhile. I only want time to think—only a little time, if you will grant it."

"Everything you wish is a law to me," said James Strahan, as he bowed very low over the hand extended to him, like a gentleman of the old school, rather than an overlooker at the docks. The tender passion had rendered him quite a courteous being already.

He went away feeling that he had made considerable progress in his love-suit—that there was hope for him—that Sissie Eston, taken by surprise, had only pleaded for a little time to become accustomed to him and his ways before accepting him. She would have said No at once if she had disliked him very much—if she had disliked him

at all ; every word and thought of hers was truth itself, and he might be sure of a peaceful and blissful existence in sharing it with hers. So happy, so contented, so amiable, so religious a girl—what a prize for a working-man like him, and how far beyond his deserts !

If he could have seen her in her room five minutes later, as in the wizard's crystal of old story-books, what would he have thought of Sissie's happiness and peace of mind ? Was not the half-prostrate figure in the chair grief-stricken enough to suggest much mental misery—possibly even some remorse ? Was life opening out here with any of those golden rays of hope presaging a bright day-dawn ; or was the light stealing away and the sun sinking down into ominous cloud-land ?

CHAPTER XV.

ALL JEM'S FAULT.

WAS James Strahan after all so firm a man as he believed himself to be, or were there powers to weaken him, and unseen forces with the strength to hurl him down? He was very human that night, for he was very restless. A boy of eighteen, torn by the love emotions of his first romance, could have scarcely been wilder in his demeanour than James Strahan was. Certainly it was James Strahan's first love story also, and to be the hero of it, to emerge as it were from the shadowy land of prosaic, hard, every-day work, to a glittering fairy realm of hope and future felicity—he who had never known what felicity was like—was to work a wondrous change in him. He went upstairs with the intention of retiring to rest, and thinking it all over in the quietude of his chamber; but he discovered that he was never so wide-awake in his life, and so disinclined to sit still. He came downstairs again to keep his father company, thinking he might cheer up the old man a bit with the reflex of his own bright thoughts, and he

found the parlour empty and the fire out. He went out of doors for a long-walk again ; exercise would do him good and fatigue him, and he could think to his heart's content as he strode through the streets. Presently he found himself walking in the direction of his brother's chambers. He had not thought of calling upon Victor again very seriously, but it began to impress itself upon his mind that he would be glad to tell his brother all that had occurred, and to receive the congratulations which ne was sure Victor would be prepared to offer him. For Victor was a good-hearted fellow, and envied no man's happiness. And this was a time for happiness, now that Sissie Eston had informed him she would wait and consider—that she only wanted time. This, or something like this, Dick's sister had said to him ; at all events she had not refused him, and she had given much hope to his heart. It would all end very blissfully, he was sure of that. A modest maiden was not likely to say Yes at once, as if she were ready to jump down the throat of the first young man who asked her to be his wife ; she would take time to consider, even if no particular consideration were necessary. Of course she would!—and the longer she considered, thought James Strahan, with his *naïve* conceit rising slowly to the surface again, the more she would discover

that beneath his rough exterior, his want of polish, were a few of the sterling qualities which make the man,

Yes, he would go right back to Victor's chambers ; the walk would benefit him, and he could get over any distance that night. If the lights were out behind the blinds—and he could see that from the Inn itself—why he could turn back without disturbing the rest of his brother, and let him know the news, the good news, next day.

He marched on swiftly and decisively ; he was astonished at the pace at which he had walked when he found himself at the gates of Danes' Inn, and the porter was looking doubtfully at him through the iron gates.

"I want to see Mr. Strahan again, if he's still up," said our hero.

"Oh, yes—he's up. He has some friends to-night."

"All right ; they'll soon be gone now. I'll come in."

The man stared at James Strahan, and then grinned, as at a good joke which our hero had failed to perceive ; then he swung back the heavy iron gates, and admitted the late comer. The clock of St. Clement Danes struck midnight as James passed into the narrow slip of causeway flanked by the great gloomy houses on either

side ; there was a stream of light from his brother's rooms falling athwart the pavement ; he could hear the loud voices, the louder laughter of the guests, as he stopped for a moment to listen.

"Perhaps I had better not intrude just now," he murmured to himself ; then he moved on again, and went swiftly through the open doorway and up the staircase to the first-floor. Victor would be glad to see him at any rate, and the company surely would not remain much longer.

"I half promised to come back," he said, as if by way of excuse to himself for intruding on Victor and his fine gentleman friends, "and he will be glad to hear the news."

He knocked at the door—knocked twice, for amidst the laughter, tumult of voices, snatches of songs within, his first summons for admittance was not heard. It was a stranger who opened the door, and peered at James with bloodshot eyes.

"What is it?" he asked, almost peremptorily. Poor James, in his thick pilot coat, and big felt hat, looked hardly "one of the set"—a friend to drop in at the last hour, and stake his money at "Bank" or "Nap." There was a set gravity on his features, which were deepening rapidly, that was scarcely an omen of pleasant company, and it was hardly the perfect gentleman who was standing there on the landing-place.

"I want to see Victor Strahan," said James.

"Oh! he's busy, my good fellah—you'd better come some other time."

The man was flushed, and thick of utterance—there was a cigar in his mouth, and three playing-cards in his hand. He had evidently risen from the game to answer the door, and to answer it not too graciously.

"I'll come in now, if you please," said James Strahan, roughly.

"I don't think you'll do anything of the sort," replied the other, standing in his way for a moment, and then finding himself suddenly thrust aside, cracked almost like a nut between James Strahan and the door, as the new-comer strode by him with scant ceremony, setting him quietly but firmly out of his path.

James Strahan was standing in the room the instant afterwards, gazing with stern bewilderment at the scene upon which he had intruded. There were some eight or ten gentlemen there—numbers had increased with the lateness of the hour—all red-faced, bright-eyed, excited men, huddled round a centre table on which many sovereigns were scattered. The cards were being rapidly dealt, and the men were clutching at them with greedy haste—they were playing for high stakes, smoking and drinking hard meanwhile, and the advent of

the stranger did not attract more than a passing glance. A friend of Vic Strahan's, probably—they did not look twice at him—he would join them presently, or go and talk to Vic in the next room. Vic, who had been "floored" early, and was obliged to lie down and rest—Vic, who was "gloriously screwed," and whom a kind friend had helped into the next room out of the way.

"Where's my brother?" James had asked, and then these sorry details had been furnished him in a desultory fashion, by sundry guests, and without looking up through the haze of tobacco-smoke to the inquirer. The man who had admitted James came back rubbing his shoulder, and regarding the new arrival not too amiably.

"Is he ill, then?" asked James Strahan.

"Well, he's sewed up for the present—he'll turn up in an hour or so, I'll be bound, when he hears I have got all the luck to-night. Pool again! Mine!" And the white be-ringed hands of the speaker raked towards him the sovereigns which he had won by a lucky turn of the cards. There was some laughter, rude screaming laughter, with no true ring in it—more like a yell of the lost than expressive of any genuine hilarity—then a torrent of oaths against the winner's good fortune, and fresh glasses of spirits before the game was resumed.

"My brother is ill, then?" repeated James Strahan.

"A bit seedy—that's all."

"And you all stay here, and play cards and drink that poison, whilst the man you have made drunk lies in there," cried Strahan, "with none of you caring for him or thinking of him. You may consider you are gentlemen, and call yourselves gentlemen, but I don't."

And with this candid expression of opinion he passed into the other room.

"That's cool," said one man, more sober than the rest.

"I never heard such impudence in my life," said another.

"Vic's brother, eh?" remarked a third. "I did not know he had a brother."

"Ashamed to speak of him, no doubt," said the man who had attempted to prevent James Strahan's entrance. "A rough brute, and as strong as a confounded navvy."

"Vic thinks a deal of him," said one man, who had not hitherto spoken. "You should have heard him take me to task about this fellow before you chaps arrived. I can't make it out at all."

"Who asked you?—Deal, will you?" cried another. "I haven't come here to listen to your talk. I've lost my money—I want a chance of

getting it back before I go. And I want some more whisky—pass that whisky, you drunken idiot, do!”

The words echoed into the room where James Strahan was, and where his brother Victor, white as a ghost, was lying, dressed, upon the bed.

“Tell them to go, Jamie,” he said. “Tell them I can’t stand any more of this row—I’m desperately ill to-night.”

James Strahan needed no second bidding. He walked back to the revellers, and looked very gravely at them all.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “my brother wants you to go away; he is ill.”

“Oh, hang it! Here, old man, that’s too bad,” cried the voices of the guests. “Vic, you’re not going to break us up yet?” “Vic, this isn’t true.”

“And the sooner you go away the better,” added James.

“What right have you to tell us to go?” said one man, firing up at once.

“No right in my brother’s house, and to my brother’s guests, without his wish; but, being his wish, the party is at an end.” And James Strahan leaned across the table, took up the cards, and flung them into the fire.

There were expressions of amazement and

remonstrance ; there were some threatening looks ; but no one ventured to touch James Strahan. He looked too dangerous a customer to encounter at that hour of the night—too solid and too sober.

“ If your brother were not drunk, he would never have sent such a message as that to his friends,” said one man, as he struggled into his overcoat.

“ If your brother weren’t a fool, he’d keep such a bear as you locked up out of the way,” hiccuped the man who had admitted him.

“ He’s not a fool, only in having such a disreputable lot about him, and calling them his friends. You, friends of my brother Vic !” he shouted, scornfully, as his eyes blazed forth with a strange flame. “ You friends of any honest, God-fearing man, and to drag him down to this—you, to make him drunk, and then jest at his helplessness—you, to ruin him, body and soul, and then laugh at the misery of his fall and the misery he brings to those who love him ! Get out into the dark streets, that are more fitting for such beasts as you than any decent home ! Get away from here !”

They did not stop to bandy further words with this loud-voiced disputant ; they passed out of the room, and went trooping down the stairs together. It was only in the fore-court of the Inn that they grew noisy again over the treatment to which they

had been subjected, which they considered mean and low and shabby—oh, awfully shabby!—and in distressingly bad form. This they maintained in a variety of high keys, until a policeman from the Strand looked through the gates which the porter had opened, and advised them to get home; and then the tones of persuasive authority scattered these discordant atoms of humanity, and there was silence in Danes' Inn.

Silence, but not peace of mind. For, the guests being gone, Victor had staggered back to the sitting-room, and the wreck of cards and glasses, and flung himself in an easy-chair before the fire—a poor wreck himself of all sobriety.

"To think this of you, Vic!" said the elder brother, sorrowfully.

"It's your fault!" said the other.

"My fault!" said the other.

"Yes—all yours, Jem," was the answer; "and I'll tell you why."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DRINK.

VICTOR STRAHAN, having enunciated the reason for his sad condition, sat heaped in the easy-chair before the fire in a very nerveless and prostrate state. His brother regarded him with increasing sadness ; there were tears even in his eyes at the change in him, or at the charge which he had made.

"Why is it my fault?" James Strahan said at last.

"You came here and unsettled me," Victor confessed. "I am a man easily disturbed—an impulsive fool, if you will—and you brought me news I did not like."

"What news? Do you mean——"

"Never mind what I say, Jemmy," he said with sudden alacrity, "the drink has got hold of me to-night—I was never so completely thrown out of my reckoning before. I—I—don't know what I'm saying."

"Poor Vic, I am afraid you don't," said the elder brother ; "and, under those circumstances, I should go to bed."

"Ar'n't you going to preach up on the enormity of my offence?—haven't you one temperance lecture for me before you go away to-night?" he asked, with a sudden acerbity of demeanour which it was not pleasant to confront.

"Not one—to-night," said James, shaking his head; "you are not in a fit state to listen to me."

"That's one advantage at any rate," said Victor, sarcastically.

"Perhaps so," answered James; "so get to bed, and let me see you are safely stowed away before I leave you. Come, Vic—take my arm."

"Let me be," said Vic, querulously, "if I were 'stowed away' in my grave it would be all the better."

"Why?"

"I am no use in the world. I have never done a good turn to anybody—made one sacrifice to self—helped one man or woman to a better thought or action. I am a weed, Jamie."

"Yes—and you are getting maudlin. Now for bed, Vic."

"One moment more," said Victor. "What—what did you come back for? What on earth made you think of looking me up again at this hour?"

"I brought you good news—I said I would probably return; don't you remember?"

"I remember nothing, but——"

"But what?"

"Go on. Why did you come back?"

"To tell you that Sissie Eston looks favourably upon my suit—that, taking your advice, I went at the matter straightforwardly, told her I loved her, and asked her to give me a chance."

"And she will?"

"Yes. She will think it all over—and love me in good time, I am sure. She—but oh! Vic, you're too drunk to care about my happiness to-night. I wish I had never come."

"I wish you had not. You have broken up a jolly party, Jamie!"

"Why, you told me to get rid of them all," cried his brother.

"So I did. Well—Sissie will have you for a husband presently, and you will accept my con—con—con—gratu—lations. Tell her," he added, "I wish her every felicity, and"—he paused and then sprang to his feet, and towered over his brother, who had been calmly facing him in the opposite chair—"and I will have no more of this. I hate her and you, and everybody in the world. By Heaven I do!"

"I'm sorry to hear it, but this is the madness born of drink, and not my brother Vic," said James.

"You come with your talk of happiness to a miserable wretch—you remind him of his folly and weakness," he cried; "why, you made him drink to-night, and that was the only way by which he could forget."

"No—no."

"I tell you it was."

"What have you been trying to forget?"

"The chance I have lost."

"Vic—you did love Miss Bocker after all. You have quarrelled, and separated, and——"

"Yes, yes, that's it. Anything you like."

"Unless——" and for a moment his face became grave and thoughtful, "it is Sissie Eston who——"

"Sissie Eston!" screamed his brother, "what a burlesque! What do I know of her? When have I seen her? What attraction would such a red-cheeked country wench have for me? I am a man of fashion in my way—a man of society—a man of the world—an, an awful fool, Jamie!"

"You couldn't have thought of her," said Jamie, still thoughtfully—"but there, to-morrow we'll talk of this again, if you like."

"I don't want to hear any more about it."

"Very well."

"To-morrow," continued Victor, "I am going away. For a long holiday—off and on."

"Indeed. Where?"

"To Brighton. The Bockers are at Brighton. Charming people," he said with enthusiasm, "and Miss Bocker, the most highly-gifted young lady whom I have ever met. Did I ever tell you about her?"

"Oh! yes."

"It's a real love story, but it is too long for this evening, or this early morning. I'll go to bed now."

"Do."

"Good-night. I don't want any help, Jem. I'm all right now," he said, as he walked towards his room.

James Strahan watched him depart, and sat before the fire looking at the red coals long after his brother had quitted him. Presently he got up and went into the room also. Victor was in bed, red-eyed and drowsy.

"Are you all right?"

"Splendid, Jemmy," was the answer.

"Have you anything to say to me before I go?"

"Nothing. My con—congratulations—did I give them to you and Sissie?"

"Yes," he replied; "shall I wait till you are asleep?"

"Oh! no," he said with a shiver, "don't wait any longer, please."

"Good-night, then."

"Good-night."

James Strahan closed his brother's door, and then gathered up a few more cards from the floor and put them in the fire also. There was a brass fire-guard at the side, and this he hooked on to the top bar of the grate, then he put the chairs in order, turned out two of the gas-burners, paused with his hand to the third, and thought again.

Suddenly he sat down and scribbled in pencil a few lines on paper, which he placed on the table for Victor to see the first thing to-morrow. These were the lines which the man, suddenly doubtful of the truth of things, wrote quickly:—

"If it should be that you ever cared for Sissie Eston, let me know to-morrow. If you ever cared for Miss Bocker, go to Brighton and make it up with her. And don't drink any more, Vic; think of the poor mother and father, and their sad lives and—pray."

The next day James Strahan received a telegram from Victor.

"*Reached Brighton in safety,*" was all that it said.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STATE OF PROBATION.

IF one might judge from the aspect of external things, it was as if James Strahan had begun his new life already ; he seemed to change so suddenly for the better. All his objectionable brusqueness, even hardness, of demeanour vanished away as if by magic, and there was a new and brighter look upon his face, as of a man in the sunshine, and with peace at his heart. He had not known it before, or he had not been willing to confess it, that with all his sense of right and his earnest purpose, he had hardly been a contented man, certainly not a happy one. There was a something wanting, which our readers have perceived for themselves, and which cast a shadow on him and on those about him. He was not a man deeply loved by anyone ; even those who respected him took offence at times, and those who disliked his preaching shunned him persistently. His father was afraid of him, though he knew a more trustworthy son did not exist than his Jamie. There had been very few kind words, words of fair per-

suasiveness, to fall from the lips of James Strahan—the rough school in which he had been reared had not tended to winning ways. He had essayed to make many converts, he had striven hard to turn the weak and erring into the right path, he had fought for his temperance creed with all the fervour of a man with his soul in the cause, but he had expected sobriety of life and conduct, penitence and reverence to follow every word he uttered, though he uttered it with a scoff at human weakness, or a satire at his fellow-men's temptations. He had hardly understood the value of gentle words—he would have scourged a man into goodness had it been in his power. There had been some of the old Puritan sourness about Strahan until this grim lion had fallen in love with Sissie Eston—and then, under the softening influence of woman's society, a change had come o'er the spirit of his dreams. In some respects he became more like his brother Victor—there was a polish about him in Sissie's company that was almost startling, and the girl from Devonshire, though taking credit for the change in him, was sad in thinking of its cause.

There was no more talk of love between them, for they were an odd couple, and Jamie was an odd suitor. He had had "his say" one memorable evening; it had been settled that he should give

Dick's sister time to understand him, and not worry her, and as she *was* taking time, any undue haste would only tell in his disfavour. He was happy enough, for he had faith in time, and in Sissie Eston. He was as good as engaged to her already, he considered. He went out with her very frequently to see how the new Working Men's Club was progressing; he talked it over with her at home: he accompanied her to church on Sundays. In all his life he had never known such happiness as this, and the goodness in his heart was stirred by it, and rose to the surface, to the benefit of other folk. Mr. Strahan, senior, was amazed at the change in his elder son, and for a time was at a loss to account for it. When it dawned upon him, chiefly from a hint of Polly's, he became thoughtful, and absented himself more constantly from home, not so much to give this couple an opportunity of exchanging those vows of affection which he had heard were patent to occasions of the kind, but to reflect upon the matter at the bars of the various public-houses with which he was acquainted.

"This wants a lot of thinking over," said James Strahan's father to Polly once.

"Yes, old gentleman; and a lot of drinking over, too," was Polly's answer, as it became her unfortunate duty to assist him on the

steps in front of the house in the Commercial Road.

There came a time when it was evident to all but James Strahan—for James Strahan's love was very blind indeed—that Sissie Eston was more thoughtful than her wont, and that the "change for the better" which had come to the overlooker at the Docks was not so readily apparent in the features of her whom he was seeking for his wife. Had Sissie Eston tried to like James Strahan, and failed in the attempt? Had she begun to fear him, rather than to love him, that she looked so like a startled deer when he came upon her suddenly? Was the effort beyond her strength, after two months' trial, and was it telling upon her at last? One could almost think so; in the solitude of her own room, when he was away at his work, one could believe so, judging by her secret grief and bitter tears. Certainly this could not be happiness, though she might be trying to love her dead brother's friend for his own sake, and in generous return for his deep love for her. That, at least, there was something on her mind not conducive to its peace was evident; when would it become James Strahan's duty to ask the reason for it?

The man was so trustful, so ready to be deceived by the forced manners—"the company manners"—of poor Sissie; he was so thoroughly

"I wonder whether he *is* attracted by the money, or the girl," said James.

"He may love her very much," Sissie remarked.

"I begin to doubt it again; somehow. Almost the last time I saw him, he called her 'a cat.'"

"I am glad of that," said Sissie, so quickly and heartily, that James Strahan regarded her with profound amazement. "For it shows," she continued, with a little stammer, "that he is not after her, or her money either."

"Ye-es," was the hesitative response.

The old year died away, and the new one came on apace. It was more than a month old when James Strahan was beginning to wish that matters were "settled a bit," though he only looked his wishes at Dick's sister. Perhaps he had begun to see at last that Sissie Eston was hardly as strong or bright as he could wish, and that there *was* a change in her. With every day, too, a greater and more surprising change, a variable mood, even a sign of some little irritability—summer and now winter in her smiles—a very woman, sarcastic people might have said.

"I must have a little talk with Sissie," muttered James Strahan. "It is time she made up her mind, I think."

He was saying this to himself when he came out of the Docks, where he had left the cares of

business behind him. In the dark streets which had been his home, and where poor Dick had been murdered, there came upon him another shadow deeper than the rest. It was the old woman Dinah who cast it on him—herself the grim shadow of a woman that wintry night, with the sleet cutting like wire at them both as she faced him, shivering and thinly clad, and with her claw-like hands thrust forth in the old begging fashion.

“James Strahan—I’ve been a waitin’ for yer ever so long. I am starvin’,” she whined; “save me from the orful workus—do!”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Yer good father was kind enough to give me yer address,” she answered.

“Very kind of him, indeed,” remarked James. “Well, Dinah, I have heard this story before, you know.”

“Oh! but it’s real trouble now—nothin’ to eat for——”

As the woman staggered against the wall for support, James Strahan saw very clearly that the weakness was of drink, not want.

“I’ll not help you to-night, Dinah,” he said, with his old sternness. “I’ll not give you any money.”

“Why not?” asked Dinah sharply, “have I

said anythink to offend yer high and mighty-ship?"

"You're not sober."

"I'm starvin', and yer won't believe me," she cried. "Oh! what a wretch yer are."

"No."

"Werry hard of belief, then."

"Yes, I am."

"Ah! P'raps yer believes ye're goin' to marry that smart country gal—but yer ain't," screeched Dinah now; "she's makin' a fool of yer, Jamie, and she likes yer dandy brother best. Ha! ha! ever so much the best! Ha! ha! I know it—I've knowed it ever so long, and I can prove it, too."

"What do you mean?"

James Strahan caught at the witch's arm, which was outstretched towards him, and peered into her wrinkled face. And she looked like a witch that night who was prophesying evil—but an evil that might come to pass at any moment.

"What can you prove?"

"Everythink," she said, shaking her head vehemently. "Ah! and to-night, too, if yer like."

"Yes—I like," was the stern reply.

"Come on, then—yer jest foller me."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CRUEL TRUTH.

THE woman known in Ratcliffe Highway by the strange title of "Down-the-Dolly Dinah" moved on at a smart pace for her years, immediately the last words had escaped her lips, and James Strahan followed her at a few yards' distance. She was a woman with a wonderful knowledge of the locality ; even the man following her, and born and bred there as he had been, marvelled at the "short cuts" and the innumerable turnings through which his guide conducted him, splashing through the mud in the gutters and roadways as often as she kept her course on the wet pavement, sometimes breaking into an eccentric trot, as though pressed for time or haste was necessary, and occasionally limping frightfully, but never slackening her speed on account of her infirmity. She stopped three times on her route, but it was not to recover her breath, or rest her limbs.

The first time she said, huskily :—

"Mind me, Jamie, 'tain't doin' this fer luv of yer. Yer'll reward me handsom, won't yer?"

"You shall have money."

"Yer doubts my word, and so I proves my argyment," she said. "That's fair, ain't it?"

"Quite fair."

The second time she stopped, it was before the doors of a low beer-shop in a dimly-lighted street.

"I'm drefful thusty, Jamie," she said. "Yer can't s'pose how thusty I am!"

"You'll not drink now."

"I'm a good mind not to take yer a step further," said the old woman, sullenly. "If it wasn't for the larks on it, I wouldn't. But it will pay yer out, Jamie, and I never liked yer—never. Allers too much stuck-up for me, yer wos."

And after this polite remark, off scuttled Dinah again at an extra rate of progression. James Strahan plodded on after her, moody, yet resolved. He did not know why he should waste his time in following her like this, why he should place faith in her, or why he should not have laughed her remarks to scorn, as the ravings of a demented woman—one who was thought to have gone half-crazy with drink years and years ago, and whom he had seen "mad drunk" himself, and carried by four policemen on a stretcher to the station-house. He could not fathom, or dared not, the reasons for his following Dinah. She was malicious enough to lead him the wrong road, to tell him a

false story; but there was a far-off echo of her own suspicions in his heart, and it had been ringing there, very low and softly perhaps, from the night he had called at Danes' Inn on his brother, and left him a note to read on the following morning. Was this poor hag to solve the mystery for him—to be, as it were, his evil genius, leading him to the cruel truth of it all?

For the third time in the course of some fifteen or twenty minutes she halted suddenly. They had turned from the narrow streets into a wider thoroughfare, where shops were bright with gas, where many people were hurrying to and fro, and the sleet and cold did not seem to matter much, there was such urgent business on hand for these folk.

James Strahan looked round with surprise. By a route unknown to him he was standing at the door of the Working Men's Club which the energy of Sissie Eston had helped to establish a month or two ago.

"I s'pose yer'll stand me sum korfee at yer own spruce establishment?" said Dinah with bitter sarcasm. "They allows ladies in the front bar of the pallis, Jamie!"

"Yes, you can have as much coffee as you like—presently."

"Why, presently?"

"When you have earned it," James Strahan replied.

"Oh, the likes of that now!" she cried. "Oh, what a hurry we're in, to find out our gal's goin's on with another chap! Well, I won't have yer korfee, Jamie. I ain't a goin' to ruin a fine constitooshun with any sich muck—and I've earned my money fair and square."

"In what way?"

"Here's the end of the journey. Go in there, my teetotal friend, and be as happy as—yer can."

"You are deceiving me."

"No, I ain't."

"Who is in there then?" asked James Strahan, hesitating at last, and at the step before him.

"Yer brother—and the gal ye're courtin'."

"It's a lie," he said roughly; "my brother's not in town."

"He's been here a week, Jamie," answered Dinah, "day after day—and slopes home afore yer come round in the evenin'. Can't yer look fer yourself, if yer won't take a lady's word?"

James Strahan glared at her strangely for a moment, and then in one long stride crossed the pavement, pushed open the swing glass-door and looked in. A moment afterwards he had entered the front shop, and was lost to the sight of the

woman on the kerbstone—another instant and he was back at her side with such a look upon his face that even this half-dazed creature shrank away from it, as if scared by all that she had conjured up in her malevolence. He took out the silver which he had in his pocket, and poured it into her hands like water.

“There’s your reward,” he said. “Now go.”

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CRISIS.

DINAH would fain have lingered to see the result of her information, but she was afraid of resisting this man's will—indeed very much afraid of him altogether. The claw-like hands fastened upon the silver ; there was a rapid dash into the gutter again to secure a sixpence which had slipped through her fingers, and then she was ready to depart.

"I'll go at wunst, Jamie," she said. "If yer had been arf as kind as this in the Highway, I wouldn't have told yer."

"I am glad you have," was the hoarse reply.

"He's been a sneakin' outside here ev'ry day, for ever so long ; he didn't go in at all till——"

"Will you go ?" shouted James Strahan at her, and the old woman stayed to impart no further intelligence, but melted away like a spectre into the darkness of the streets from which they had recently emerged, and was seen no more on that night of bitter memories.

James Strahan waited there a few more minutes,

as if to make sure of Dinah's departure, or to map out his scheme of action, as well as his strangely beating temples would allow ; then he pushed open the swing door again and passed in. There were several men and women in the place whom he knew by sight, and who knew him : they were drinking coffee, or reading, or talking, and a few of them said " Good evening," but he did not answer them. He had not even heard them. He passed from the shop to a little room beyond it, which the managers had for their own private use or to receive friends interested in the movement ; and through the glass windows of which he had peered only a few moments since, before bestowing his money recklessly on Dinah.

On this occasion he turned the handle of the door and entered with scant ceremony. Sissie Eston was posting some accounts in a little ledger open before her on the table, and by her side, half leaning over her, and making suggestions as to her mode of conducting the accounts, was his brother Victor, whom he had believed to be at Brighton.

Both looked up as he entered, Sissie changing colour very rapidly, and Victor Strahan turning white as death. It was a grim surprise for them, and the look upon the elder brother's face scared them even more than it had done the old woman.

"James!" exclaimed Sissie, who was the first to speak. "Why, you have come straight from the Docks. You have not been home at all."

"No," he answered slowly, "I have not been home."

"And a rare fright I have given you, old boy, it seems," said Victor, recovering himself a little. "Why you look as if you had seen a ghost!"

"So I have."

Victor and Sissie did not answer now;—they both waited for his next words. The truth lying between those three, was very close at hand, and there was no self-deception left for either of them after the big hand of the clock opposite had scored another minute on the dial.

"I have seen the ghost of my dead love," said James Strahan, mournfully, "and it has killed me."

The hand which Victor had stretched out to grasp his brother's, fell back to his side, and he stammered forth—

"I don't know what you mean or what you think, Jamie."

"I will tell you," said his brother, "presently. But first and foremost, Sissie Eston, how long has this man been in London? I ask you," he said, sternly, "because I don't believe in him any more."

"Jamiel!" cried Victor.

"I don't know," he added rudely to her, "if I am likely to believe you either—but at least I will try."

He sat down facing them, and waited patiently for her answer to his question. She had turned red, and then pale also, looking at him askance and listening to his bitter words. But she made an effort to answer him.

"About a week, I think."

"Yes—that's about it," answered James.

"You know then——"

"I have had my spy—I paid her to bring me here," he said.

"You!—you, James!" exclaimed Sissie in profound astonishment, "to have me watched—to watch anybody! It's impossible."

He had at least been her hero until then—the best man she had ever known, even if she were afraid of him somewhat, and loved him not at all; and this act of his was so inconsistent with his character, and all the professions of his life, that it was incomprehensible to her, and utterly beyond belief even from his own white lips.

"It is quite true," he answered.

He made no attempt at explanation, at the sorry chance which had set Dinah in his path—he did not care what she thought of him, he did

not seem to care for anything beyond the fact of his great loss. Loss of confidence in all the world, now that the woman whom he had loved had deceived him—loss of hope in any happiness for himself in the years lying beyond this night.

"I am very sorry to hear you say it," was Sissie's reply to him. Then she waited for his further speech ; and Victor, standing in the background, waited and watched also.

"I don't know," James Strahan continued, "that I have any occasion to make a long speech, or to utter many reproaches. I am only curious to know why you both should have hidden this love of yours from me. I don't think I would have stood in your way. God knows, the happiness of both of you has lain very close to my heart—of that man's all my life ; and this is but a poor return for the great trust I had."

"Jamie, you mistake," Victor exclaimed. "I had never spoken a word of love to Sissie when you came to Danes' Inn. You led me to believe she cared for you on the second time you called that night—that she had accepted you. My tongue was tied for your sake then—for my pride's sake, if you will," he added, as his brother shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"But he loved you all the while?" he said to Sissie, although it was his answer to the brother,

at whom he never glanced. Victor replied for himself—

“I own it—yes.”

“And yet I left him an opening for escape from the deceit which it had pleased him to use towards me, Sissie,” said James Strahan. “I left a note for him to read ; because my common sense had begun to warn me of the truth. I asked him in it the plain question if he had ever loved you, and to let me know it ; otherwise, to go away to another whom I thought he might love. And he went.”

“To leave you happy,” said Victor again ; “to try and forget her in whom I thought I had been terribly mistaken. Oh, Jem, I was not as selfish as you make me out : I was only a weak fool, who did not know how much better it would have been to tell the truth at once. But,” he added, after he had waited for his brother’s answer, which was not vouchsafed to him, “I did not want her to know I had loved her, when it seemed so easy for her to set me on one side and take to you. I thought I had been mistaken altogether, and—I went away.”

“But to come back again, Sissie Eston,” James said, still ignoring his brother’s presence, and yet listening to him patiently ; “and so all’s well that ends well. Good-night.”

He was standing up now, and buttoning slowly his pilot coat. Having heard the confession of his brother's attachment to the girl before him, it was as if all further explanation were unnecessary. Sissie Eston had scarcely said a word, but she had listened to Victor's statement, and by her silence acquiesced in it; and so it was all over!

As he thought; but Sissie Eston had only waited for Victor to finish his impulsive speech. As James Strahan rose, she rose too, and put her hands upon his arm, where he let them rest—even looked down upon them wonderingly and fondly.

"You must not go away thinking the worst of me, James," she said very earnestly. "If I have deceived you, I have deceived myself, and I am very, very sorry. I ask you to forgive me, I believe my heart will break if you do not, for I shall have helped you to so much unhappiness."

"You never promised to marry me," said James Strahan. "I was only on trial, and you have seen some one you like better than me; and there's an end of it."

"Oh! but I did try," she cried; "oh, I tried so hard, knowing so well how much you thought of me, and thinking——"

"Thinking that my brother did not love you, and you had been mistaken in him, too," he con-

cluded ; "but finding out the truth at last. There, that's the story, and a hard one for me, though I was only a fool."

"No, no."

"Yes, yes," he answered ; "for I should have seen all this, and known how unfit I was for you. I only complain that you should have kept this a secret from me ; should have met here with my brother——"

"I should have told you everything to-night," said Sissie, interrupting him.

"We were coming to you, both of us," added Victor. "It was only to-night that we even understood each other."

"Good-night, Miss Eston," James Strahan said, taking both her hands in his ; "there is no occasion for me to stop any longer."

"But you will forgive me all my weakness?" she implored ; "all my want of knowledge of the truth?"

"And the truth was, you loved Victor all the while?" he added.

"Yes," she answered, looking down.

"You did not know you were treating me so badly?" he said.

"I did not?"

"You were jealous and aggrieved, and I was the victim," said James Strahan. "Yes, I forgive you."

He released her hands, and was turning away, when she exclaimed, almost piteously—

“And Victor? Don’t go away like this—say you forgive him too!”

“Never!” answered the brother.

He did not glance towards Victor Strahan as he walked out of the room; he did not look at Sissie Eston any more. It was all over, as he had said. The little dream he had had of wedded happiness, of a different and brighter life for him, of the world taking strange and brilliant colourings from the new existence which a faithful love would give, had dissolved, after the law of dreams, and he was his hard self again, for whom nobody had cared, and a great many had utterly disliked.

It was all over! In the street into which he passed from the coffee tavern, those four words were ringing in his ears. Some church bells were clashing out their summons to a week-day service as he strode on, and the words seemed echoing in mockery from brazen throats, exultant at his discomfort. A boy passed him in the street, howling a ribald song from the music halls—the last inane composition which the verdict of an inane audience had rendered popular—and the words were of a woman’s infidelity, and seemed appropriate to the grim occasion, as if in mockery of him. There were men and women lounging

and talking at the bar of a public-house which he passed. They were shrieking with laughter, as though they were the happiest beings in the world, to whom the cares of life were as nothing, and he stopped and looked in. It was all very bright and radiant within there, and he was out in the cold sleet, and at his heart's core a trouble which he would give the world to forget.

What was in this drink which made people forget so readily? he wondered now. Could he drink away the forgetfulness of a man's treachery, a woman's fickleness, the consciousness of how everybody hated him, and played him false? To forget his terrible unhappiness—just for one night, till he was stronger of mind, and more used to it!

He strode in with that stern look on his face which had been more common to him before he had known Sissie Eston, and with a glare of defiance added to it, which was new.

"Something to drink—anything!" he said to the man in his shirt-sleeves behind the bar.

The man laughed.

"That won't do—you'd better mention what you want," the landlord said.

"Rum," answered James Strahan.

He had seen the effects of that at sea,—in the Highway—in his miserable home.

"Half-a-quartern?" asked the man

"A quartern," answered James Strahan.

"Ah! you're an old hand, I see," remarked the landlord, treating the matter facetiously, despite the sombre looks of his customer.

The rum was drawn and placed on the pewter-covered counter in a measure along with a wine-glass. James Strahan stood and gazed at it.

"Fivepence," said the landlord.

James Strahan felt in his pockets mechanically; he had given all his ready cash to Down-the-Dolly Dinah, but had forgotten it. He had not a penny in the world just then.

"I haven't any money with me," he said. "Will you trust me till——"

The man snatched away his alcohol with an angry oath, and shook his fist across the counter at his last customer.

"Here, you clear out of this! None of those tricks for me—none of those larks again, or you'll get chucked into the street, young feller, neck and crop!"

James Strahan stared at the man as if he failed to comprehend him, but he "cleared out," as requested, and went into the cold night again.

CHAPTER XX.

ONE STRUGGLE.

LIKE a man in a dream, James Strahan went on his purposeless way. He was "dazed," and the road before him was not very clear. The figures passing and repassing were dream figures like himself, and belonged not to any world that he had ever known. Strange to him even, amidst it all, was the effect which one little weak woman's want of faith in him had created. He had not been a man to believe in everything and everybody; people had often told him that he was too suspicious, and that his want of trust in his fellow-men would render his life unhappy. And now, terrible mockery as it seemed, it was only his blind faith which had wrecked him. He was on the rocks with never a helping hand or a guide line to save him; he was wonderfully and completely alone. Religion might have rescued him from the jaws of his black despair, but he did not know how little of true religion there was in him until this unlooked-for discomfiture. There was no true faith at his heart, for he could not

rise above this one disappointment of his life. More like a child than a man, he wandered on, a prey to a grief to which he, strong as he was, had given way like a child. It was his pride which had been crushed, and he had been always a proud man. The two whom he loved, and who, in his conceit, he had believed were loving him, and looking up to him, had turned completely against him. He would forgive the woman, because she was weak and had known him only a little while, and had never, never known the true state of her own feelings; but the brother of whom he had thought so much, and for whom he had done so much, to deceive him, to be afraid to tell him the whole truth, *that* was beyond his power to forgive in the first moments of his disappointment. In his own-distressed heart, he was assured that he should never forgive him—his being no forgiving nature.

He did not know he was at home, until he was standing before his own door. Instinct had taken him thither surely, for he had no remembrance of the route by which he had come. He let himself in with his pass-key, and strode into the little front parlour, where he found his father cowering over the fire as though he were very cold. Mr. Strahan senior looked round with a lack-lustre air as his son entered the room, but he

betrayed slowly some interest in James, as the change in his son was suggested to an intellect much bemuddled that evening.

"What's the matter?" he said at last, and in a very nervous fashion.

"What should be the matter?" was the rejoinder, as James Strahan threw himself into an easy-chair by the fire; "did you ever know anything the matter with me?"

"As regards health, no. Take you altogether," said his father in reply, "and you have been an exceedingly robust man. I only wish I had one-twentieth part of your robustness. I should not be the awful sufferer I am. No food agrees with me."

"And so you drink," added James Strahan, moodily.

"I must be kept up somehow. A little stimulant, now and then—and in moderation, James—seems to pull me together wonderfully," was the reply.

"To pull you to pieces, I should have said yesterday," was the son's answer, "but perhaps you are right. Perhaps you are right," he repeated to himself.

Mr. Strahan gazed anxiously at his son. James had been a very different kind of son to him lately, had treated him even respectfully, and as a

son should do, he thought, and this was a return to the old manner, and a something worse than the old manner unless that ugly scowl of James stood for nothing that particular evening. He had seen a look akin to that in the sad and sulky days, but never had it been so darksome, or so "pronounced" as now, and "What's the matter?" came again by way of feeble questioning from the thin lips.

"The matter is, father, that I'm not going to marry Sissie Eston," was the frank confession.

James Strahan's heart and mind and soul were full of this, and he must speak of it to some one. Why not to his father, who must know it very quickly? Everybody would know it soon enough; let him set the ball rolling himself, rather than gossip should not have its full swing in the Commercial Road and the Highway. It should not be said of him that he was afraid to own it—what had he ever been afraid of in his life?

"Not going to marry her," repeated the father; "well, well, perhaps it's as well. I am glad you have altered your mind."

"She has altered hers."

"Oh! indeed."

"And that amounts to the same thing, I suppose?"

"Precisely the same thing, James," assented his

father, rubbing one hand over the other, "and all's well that ends well. You wouldn't have made a good husband—that is, what I call a nice sort of husband."

"No? Why not?"

"You are better as a single man," explained Mr. Strahan, senior. "You make, I may say, quite a charming single man—at times, and when in an amiable mood, and having it all your own way, I mean—but a married man cannot expect to have it all his own way, and then dissensions arise. Now when your poor mother was alive, I——"

"That'll do," interrupted his son.

"Oh! certainly," said Mr. Strahan, submissive at once, and cowed by James Strahan's brusqueness.

He looked askance at his son, and then directed his attention to the fire again. After a while he got up, coughed feebly, and took his hat from under the chair.

"Where are you going?" asked James.

"I have promised to look up a friend to-night. And there's the books to balance again. And there's——"

"Sit down. I want to talk to you for a little while longer," said James Strahan.

"Very well. As *you* please, James," replied

the father, resuming his seat, but regarding his son with an extra degree of nervousness. Strange as James Strahan's manner was that night, the nervousness of James Strahan's father was still more remarkable. He had turned of an ashen grey, as if afraid of what might follow next—as if terribly distrustful of his own son, and of what that son might accuse him.

"I hope you are not going to make a scene. I'm not myself this evening," he whimpered; "the cold weather has affected my chest, I think."

"Drink has affected you," answered James; "but I am not going to preach to you about it any more."

"Thank you, thank you. I am exceedingly obliged to you," answered his father.

"I told you, I think, that Sissie and I were not going to be married?" said the son half vacantly.

"Bless my soul, James—yes. Just this instant."

"Ah! I thought I did. But I'm a little confused now," and the broad, bony hand of the overlooker was passed across his massive forehead, "and all about a chit of a girl. It's amazing—even to me."

"Did you particularly want to tell me all this over again?" inquired Mr. Strahan senior deferentially.

"Yes."

"Oh! thank you. And," he added after a pause, "nothing else?"

"Yes—a great deal more, man."

"Oh! good lor—what is it?" and Mr. Strahan's teeth began to chatter, and his knees to knock together.

"I have met Dinah to-night."

"You must not believe a word she says about anything or anybody. A dreadful woman—a most unreliable authority on any matter. Half-mad—half-drunk always, James," cried the father, "and not to be depended upon. A bad habit of borrowing sixpences, too. Shocking!"

James went on with his one theme.

"And she told me the plain truth of it all. It was Victor she was breaking her heart about. She was in love with him all the time."

"Dinah in love with Victor? Gracious!"

"You idiot," shouted the unfilial James, "I am talking about the girl I was going to marry."

"Oh! beg your pardon," replied the father; "yes, you *are* confused. Your grammar is confused, too, if I may be allowed to say as much in your own house."

"So, when people talk, as they will talk," continued James, "say it was all their mistake."

"What was?"

"Their mistake that *I* was going to marry her—it was your younger son. The favourite son—the lucky one—the handsome one, whom everybody likes. Don't you see?" cried James Strahan.

"Yes—yes, I think I see."

"It was not credible a gentle, timid, pretty girl, like Sissie, should take to a rough brute like me," said James Strahan. "I was always hated everywhere. I was hard, unyielding, bitter."

"A little bitter, perhaps, and always hard, but—is there any occasion to mention this just now?"

"Are you thirsty?" was the quick question here.

"Well, now you ask me, perhaps I am somewhat dry."

"You have drink in that cupboard! You are not obliged to go out such an awful night as this for it. It's always handy at your elbow—like the devil!"

Mr. Strahan senior coughed behind his hand.

"I—I thought you were kind enough to mention that you would not preach at me to-night," he said.

"I am not going to preach. Get your drink out and be happy."

"Really! Really now!" exclaimed the astonished parent.

"Yes—really."

"Well, if you don't mind," he said, "if you see it in that light, knowing what a lot of support I need in my infirmity and trouble——"

"What trouble have you?"

"Oh ! don't ask me. Life's all trouble, James, every bit of it."

"Yes—I believe that," was the answer ; "but drink's good for trouble, eh?"

"Well—one forgets, and——"

"That's it," shouted his son again, "one forgets ! That is what I want to do, for brooding on a wrong makes a man mad. Get your drink out father."

"What!"

"Get your drink out," he cried again, and with renewed excitement.

"For you, James ! Do you mean for YOU?" gasped Mr. Strahan.

"Yes."

"Bless my soul and body !" he ejaculated. "I don't think—I don't see—I don't know why—I don't recommend it. I never said I did, James."

And the old man sat down wholly bewildered, and with a strange look of terror on his face. This was a new phase of temptation to which he was wholly unaccustomed, and he did not see the end of it,—before him, only a few steps away, and so like the beginning of a new calamity, of the direst

tragedy of life, that he looked on amazed and horror-stricken, as a man might do haunted by a ghost.

"You have had trouble," said James Strahan, rising and opening the cupboard door, "and you have set it all aside. This," taking out the bottle which he found there, "has taught you forgetfulness, set you in a new mould, made your heart light in the midst of other woes. And if it has made you a wreck—what of that? And if it has shortened your days—what of that? What is length of life to the unhappy, but a longer lease of misery? Sit down and drink with me."

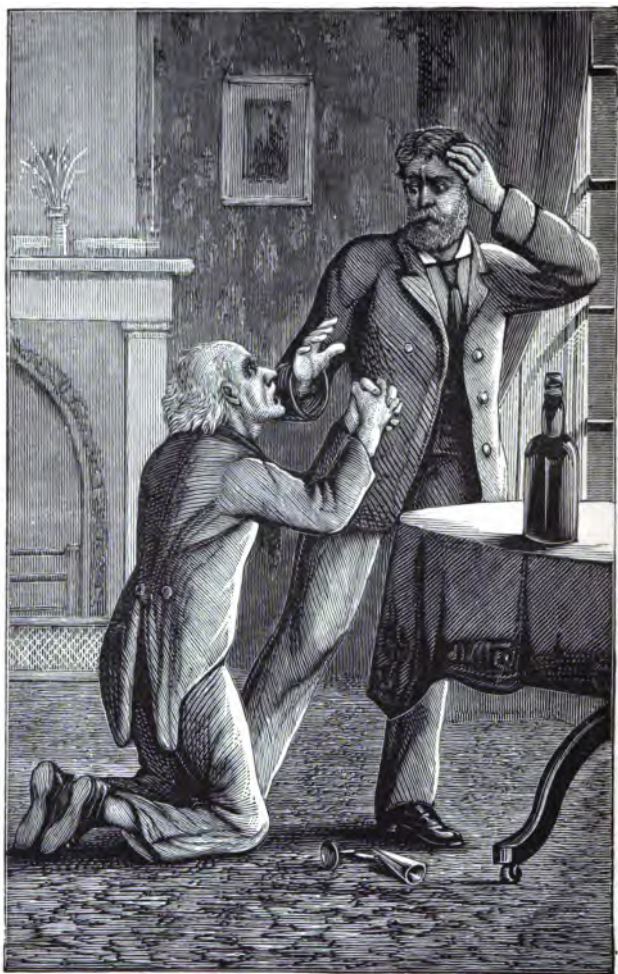
"I—I can't," was the husky answer back.

"Ay, but you must," cried the son. "You are my father, and the son looks to the father for his example. And the father's life is the example always, he being the God on earth to his children. Do you see that?"

James Strahan struck the table with his hand, and the old man screamed with affright. This was a madman surely—not his son at all. Why did he talk and rave in this manner?

"Therefore, your good health, old gentleman," said James.

He poured out the liquid from the bottle, but with a hand that shook like his weak father's; he filled the glass and raised it to his lips; he would



"OH, DON'T YOU DRINK, JAMIE."—See page 155.

have drunk the contents in his recklessness, in his defiance of his better self, had the glass not been knocked suddenly from his hand, and it had become his turn to be surprised and alarmed. It was his father who had rushed at him, and dashed the glass from him, cutting his shrivelled hands badly with the sudden action ; it was old James Strahan clinging round him, sobbing and imploring ; it was the father, grief-stricken and drink-shattered, who was kneeling at his feet, and clasping his strong limbs with shaking arms.

"Oh, don't drink !" he cried. "Oh, don't you drink, Jamie, for the good God's sake—not you !"

"What's this ?—what's this ?" asked James Strahan.

"Not my one brave son—not you, to come down to such a life as mine, and to such a thing as I am," shrieked the father. "Oh, no, no, no, not you !"

James Strahan was appalled ; he had not expected this. From the lips of this poor old drunkard to issue forth the homily which struck home and daunted him, was in itself a miracle.

"You must not touch it, Jamie," the father implored. "It is only you we have to look to, when the troubles come. You have been so clever and strong, and we have been so weak. Don't go, like us poor wretches, all adrift. Keep up—keep

always like yourself. Oh, don't give way—don't drink! See what I have come to!"

The crisis was past. The temptation to forget—it had never been to drink—was over, and James Strahan was sobered for all time. In the great grief of his father, in his strange remorse, he saw that life's duties had not closed for him, and that there was the good work to his hand, and for the good cause. No, he would not break down because his pride had been hurt, and a woman had turned from him; he was a better man already, and the weak being grovelling at his feet in despair had been the agent to lead him back to himself.

He raised his father with a strange tenderness, and led him back to his seat where the old man sat shuddering violently until the son's hand rested on the thin grey hairs.

"It is all over," he said in his father's ears, "I shall never drink now."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE OLD MYSTERY.

HE would have been a more observant man than most of his kind who could have detected next day any difference in James Strahan. That there was a difference is true, but it was imperceptible to most folk. Sissie Eston knew of it, and the father suspected it, and that was all.

At the Docks it was the same shrewd, business-like overlooker. At times a man might wonder at a new tone of softness or kindness which there seemed to be in James Strahan, and fancy now and then that the rugged face was softer in its lines, and betrayed more of sadness than of the old sternness for which it had been remarkable. He was more reticent, too, but singularly watchful — singularly anxious for extra work and extra duties which should keep him busy till the last moment of his time. At home, he was more of the father's companion, adviser, friend. There seemed a new strange link between these two, at which those who knew them both marvelled more and more. They were seen together in the streets,

and the father walked proudly by the side of his stalwart son, as if new life—as perhaps it had—had come to him at the eleventh hour.

And time passed on ; and Sissie Eston went away from the house in the Commercial Road, and took apartments some few streets off. She would marry Victor in the spring, everybody said. It was to be no long engagement ; the lovers had made up their minds, and there should be no further misunderstanding between them. Victor Strahan kept aloof from his brother ; he had taken James's word as final. He had known his brother too long, he thought, not to be sure that what James Strahan said he meant. And James Strahan had said that he would never forgive his brother all the past deceit.

What James thought we shall know ere this story ends. He had his secret probably—he had his plans of which he told no man or woman.

He did not care to encounter Sissie Eston ; on the contrary, he took every opportunity of evading her, as though every meeting brought him pain, and much sorrowful memory. When they did meet, however, he was calm, treating her always with a grave respect which brought the tears into her eyes. Their chance interviews were invariably very brief, for Sissie was anxious to evade them also. She had done her best according to her

belief, but she had done this honest fellow an injustice, nevertheless, and it was beyond her power to offer reparation. If she had in the beginning only told him the truth, or if she had quietly and completely rejected him, she would have felt more easy in her mind in these bright latter days wherein she had discovered that Victor Strahan had loved her very much.

So time went on, we say again, and spring was very close at hand, when James Strahan sitting in his room, after the long night was over, came upon the fragment of a mystery which we have left purposely a mystery till this time. He had been at home all the evening reading to his father, and the old man had not listened quite as attentively as usual, and this the son had noticed, without commenting upon it. After supper they had talked of the few weeks before Victor's marriage, and it was the father who had writhed uneasily in his chair and suggested another subject of discussion.

"You do not like the topic?" said the son.

"For your sake, no."

"You need not be afraid of me," remarked our hero, "and this is a matter we cannot very well evade."

"I am tired," said the old man.

"Well then—to-morrow we will talk of this again."

"Yes, yes, to-morrow," answered the father ;
"that's a much better time."

James Strahan bade his father good-night shortly afterwards and went upstairs to his room, where he read his little Bible by the light of the candle —by the newer, brighter light that had begun to glow within himself.

An hour afterwards, he set aside his book and listened. There were strange noises in the house —a creaking of stealthy feet along the passage downstairs, unless his quick ear had played him false. He had soon resolved upon his plan of action ; he blew out his own light, and went softly on to the shadowy stairs and descended them very noiselessly. As he turned the angle of the last flight he saw that the front door was being opened and the shining of the street-lamp beyond was bringing into black relief the figure of his father standing there and talking earnestly to some one on the steps.

James Strahan went slowly but surely towards them, wondering what was out in the dark street to keep his father restless at that hour of the night.

CHAPTER XXII.

DANGER SIGNALS.

BEFORE the two men on the doorstep were aware that there was a third person to be added to the meeting, James Strahan was before them, to their complete surprise. The man to whom Mr. Strahan, senior, was talking slipped down two steps, and would have fallen the remainder of the flight, had not James's quick hand caught him by the collar of the coat and held him fast, whilst the father fell against the doorpost helplessly, and glared wildly at his son.

"Who is this man?" asked James, peremptorily. "What is he doing here at this hour of the night?"

"He is a friend of mine come to tell me—to tell me what beautiful weather we've had lately," stammered Mr. Strahan, in a most incoherent fashion.

"You just leave go my coat," said the man who had been thus unceremoniously collared. "You take your hands off me, James Strahan."

"Oh! you know who I am?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then I'll see who you are."

And with a strength which the captured man found it impossible to resist, he brought him with a sudden jerk up the two steps into the passage, and from the passage into the front room, where a light was burning. Mr. Strahan, senior, closed the door and followed them, after a little quiet dance to himself, caused by his late companion having alighted on his tender feet in the first impetus towards the house.

James Strahan had fully expected to recognize the man whom he had now released from his grasp, but it was a complete stranger cowering before him, a pale-faced sickly young fellow, not one-and-twenty years of age, and one on whom he had not set eyes until that night. The man was trembling with nervous agitation; James Strahan's unceremonious treatment of him had not tended to his composure, and it was with furtive glances, half timid and half defiant, that he regarded the overlooker.

"I have never seen you before to my knowledge, and yet you know me?" said James. "Will you—or *you*," turning so suddenly upon his father, that the old gentleman jumped backwards in alarm again, "explain why you meet in this hide-and-seek fashion?"

"I've wanted you to know it all along," said the man sullenly. "I'm not afraid to face you, or to tell you everything. Why should I be?"

"You have been here before then?"

"Oh, yes; and at the old house, too, in the Highway for the matter of that," was the reply.

"Well, what do you want?"

The old man flung up his arms as if by way of protest; and the son said calmly, and with a ring of his old naïve conceit perhaps—

"It is better I should know this. You are not wise; you are likely to be deceived always."

"I have been afraid—Victor has been afraid of your knowing anything about it," the father confessed; "and, after all, it is coming round. It will be all right; it was only a mistake; only this young person is so impetuous and inconsistent, and——"

"Don't lay the blame on me," cried the other, fiercely. "I've been blamed quite enough already. I've lost my place through your son Victor. I've been turned out on suspicion. I've been his friend, but I'm not going to be thrown over by any of his tricks, and left to starve. I can't get a berth without a character, and he must keep me. That's positive."

"And if he does not keep you?" inquired James Strahan.

"I shall split," replied the man. "I shall tell old Bocker everything. Upon my soul I shall!"

"Bocker," repeated James Strahan, thoughtfully. "You have been in the employ of Mr. Bocker, then?"

"Yes; I was one of his clerks."

"And you came here to-night—what for?"

"To ask your guv'nor where his son is. He's left Danes Inn—sloped off without a moment's warning."

"I was not aware of it," said James, looking at his father for an explanation.

Mr. Strahan was as communicative as his companion.

"Don't let us have any scenes, James," he said, deprecatingly. "I am shattered enough, without your going off like a bomb-shell, and frightening me to death. Victor has left Danes Inn. He will not even tell me where he is living just at present."

"He has not left Bocker's firm," said James Strahan. "Where is the difficulty of finding him?"

"I can't go there," answered the clerk. "They might lock me up if I show there. They will find everything about *me*, of course; but they have no suspicion of your brother, who led me into it, step by step. I swear he did!" he cried, as

James Strahan drew a long breath of consternation. "I've been badly treated through it all. I've been ruined by him, and I have a wife and a child starving. I have—I have!" And this weak being gave way now, dropped into a chair, and began to sob like a woman, with his trembling hands covering his face.

James Strahan had become very grave during the last few minutes—the shadow of much misery and pain was falling on him. In all the troubles born of misfortune, and springing up from drink, and drink alone, he had not thought of one dishonest action in connection with his brother. He had been sanguine enough to believe his brother did not drink either, and that on that terrible night at Danes Inn, Vic had given way for once, and only once, because Sissie Eston had accepted another man instead of him, and he had had faith in the truth of her affection. That weakness James Strahan had not understood until he found that a woman's want of love for him had had power almost to wreck himself. But now! Here was tragedy in earnest about their lives. Here was another calamity, falling at a moment when James Strahan was beginning to believe in the peace of a future life for all of them, and had begun to lay his plans to perfect this. His plans!—which were for ever doomed, it seemed, to be trampled in the dust,

"I don't see what there is for Mr. Wenny to make a fuss about," said the father. "He has had his money regularly. I've given it him to-night even. Victor brought it round to me this afternoon for him. What more can he possibly want?"

"I want to know where Victor Strahan lives. I know he'll be slipping off to America and leaving me here," said the man, drying his eyes. "It must come out — it must all come out presently."

"Victor says it will be all right," said Mr. Strahan, senior. "Can't you take his word?"

"His word!" cried the man, ironically. "Oh! yes. That's a good one."

"He has never failed with you, Wenny," resumed Mr. Strahan, senior. "That is where you are so terribly inconsistent."

"I'm not going to be left in the lurch. Nobody will believe me when Victor Strahan is off; he may turn upon me at any moment, and make me out the scamp he is himself; and I won't be driven mad like this, if I can help it," said the clerk. "I'd rather split and have done with it. Then he can take his share of blame with me — and serve him right."

"You have been drinking, I think," said James Strahan, critically surveying him,

"What else can a fellow do?" muttered the man in reply to this charge.

"God help you if you can't do anything better than that," said James.

"Oh, you don't know what trouble is. You've been a lucky man," cried the clerk. "I have heard all about you. Everybody looks up to you."

"I have been unlucky. I have been tempted to drink," replied James Strahan. "I don't know now what would have been the end of it if I had given way. If this weak man," he said, turning to his father, "who couldn't save himself, had not made an effort to save me. And for this I am grateful, and will not judge him too quickly in the matter."

"I don't mind telling you all about it, sir," said the clerk. "I know they're afraid of your hearing of it, but that's nothing to me. And perhaps you——"

"No, don't tell me any more," said James Strahan. "Go home, Mr. Wenny, and leave me to think what is best. He knows, I suppose?" indicating his father.

"Oh, yes!—he knows."

"And you can leave me your address, if you will."

"Thank you, sir," the man said, with a new

civility and servility showing itself very suddenly ;
" I'll write it out at once ; I know I can trust you."

The man took a pencil from his pocket, and scribbled his address on a piece of paper which he passed over to our hero.

" You will understand," he said, " that I want only what's fair. That I expect fair play—nothing more. Now go, please," said James Strahan ; " and when you come again on any errand, ask for me, and not for my father."

" Very well."

Mr. Wenny retired from the scene, and James Strahan saw him to the door, and shut him out into the street. When the son returned, the father regarded him nervously, and with one shaking hand held up to his mouth ; the piteous expression in the bloodshot eyes was like some poor animal hunted down at last, and fearing his death-blow in another instant.

" It hasn't been my fault, in any way, Jamie," he protested with a whine.

" I can believe it," was the answer. " But I do not understand how Victor can have lived on with a big lie like this at his heart."

" He—he——"

" He has tried to deceive himself, but I think he has failed miserably."

" But, James, you don't know the facts of the

case ; and if you'll sit down quietly, and be kind enough not to fly into a passion, I am quite sure I can make them clear to you. I—I," he added, "haven't been drinking all the evening. I—I thought I wouldn't take a drop to-night."

"That's well, sir," said James, letting his hand fall on his father's shoulder, "and I'll not worry you at all. He shall tell me his own story to-morrow."

"But—but you are not friends."

"Yes we are."

"Oh ! I am glad of that. I did not know."

"Neither does he," was the answer. "But I bear him no ill-will, and I hope to prove his friend to-morrow, if it's possible."

"That—that is very good of you, James," said the father. "I had no idea you would take it in this way, and I'm sure Vic, poor boy, will be greatly pleased. It's very odd."

"What is ?"

"That you *do* take matters so very coolly and strangely of late," explained the father. "If we had only known this, Victor would long ago have told you——"

"That he was a thief," said the son, interrupting him. "Oh ! I have learned it soon enough, God knows ! Good-night."

And with these last words James Strahan went thoughtfully to his room again.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DANGER ITSELF.

VICTOR STRAHAN was not prepared for his brother's visit to Mincing Lane, which occurred on the morning of the following day. James had not called at the big office, where clerks were running in and out all day on the business of Mr. Bocker, and ostensibly in Mr. Bocker's interest, but had waited quietly in the narrow and bustling City street without for his brother's coming. The church clocks were striking ten, and Victor would be shortly on duty for the day. Presently he came towards the office, scrupulously well-dressed, with a brand new hat on his handsome head, and an orchid in his button-hole ; the picture of a prosperous City gentleman whom the world was treating fairly well. There was a fresh colour on his cheeks, until he caught sight of his brother leaning against the door of the opposite offices, then had he seen a spectre he could not have paled more suddenly, or looked more dismayed.

James Strahan crossed the road towards him, and Victor stammered forth,—

"What is the matter? What can have possibly brought you here?"

"I'll tell you in a minute, Victor. We cannot talk in the open street of all that I have come about," was the reply.

James Strahan took his brother's arm in a friendly manner that assured him somewhat, and there was a ring of tenderness in the tones of his brother's voice that Victor had not expected to hear again.

Victor regarded him with more surprise, even, though the colour came back to his cheeks.

"Have you been waiting long for me?"

"Since nine o'clock."

"But your own business——"

"I have got leave of absence."

"Well, I will not detain you now," said Victor. "I must show myself at the office for a few minutes, just to read the letters and so on, and then I am at your service. Then, indeed," he added, "I am off for the day."

"A holiday?"

"Yes, I take one when I please, now that Mr. Bocker has placed me in full command here. He does not come to town so frequently as he used," Victor explained.

"I am sorry to hear that."

"Sorry," repeated Victor; then he looked

hard at his brother, and once more changed colour.

"Do not be long ; I will wait for you."

"Will you not come into my room ? We can speak there, and——"

"No, I would rather wait outside, if you don't mind."

"Very well."

Victor Strahan passed into the office, through the ante-room full of clerks booking innumerable orders, casting up innumerable rows of figures, into another office where were three or four older and graver-looking men, absorbed also in the histories of their accounts all over the world, and finally into a third room, untenanted, where were a heap of unopened letters by the side of his desk, and rows and rows of little tea-cups on side shelves, ready for the next ordeal of taste, which was expected to put money into the coffers of Bocker & Co.

A staid clerk from room No. 2 followed him into the inner sanctum.

"Mr. Bocker will not be here to-day, and I have an important engagement that may keep me away all the afternoon," said Victor ; "you can attend to everything in my absence, Grainger ?"

"Certainly, sir."

"You are not very busy ?"

"Not very, sir."

Victor sat down, glanced carelessly at the letters, opened a few of them, looked at the business seals of the others, and then set them aside.

"It is very warm to-day, Grainger," he said.

"Yes, sir. But nice weather for the Spring Meeting."

"Ah! yes. Spring Meeting to-day, is it? Well, I hope it will keep fine."

"I hope so, Mr. Strahan," said the clerk retiring

Victor looked after him with not too amiable an expression of countenance, and then sat dreamily regarding the unopened letters. He kept his hat on after the custom of the City, or like a man who was not going to remain there many minutes; then he glanced through the wire blind of his office into the street, with a harassed and wondering expression.

He could see his brother James from where he sat, and it was a stern grave figure in the distance, with more misery on the face than he had witnessed since the night when his elder brother had told him he would never trust him again.

"I wish he had not come," he muttered, "or was not waiting there. It cannot be about Sissie; it cannot be about——"

He looked at his watch, sprang to his feet, and went rapidly out of the office. James Strahan

joined him immediately, and they walked down the street together.

"Which way are you going?" asked James at length.

"To London Bridge Station, presently."

"Are you pressed for time?"

"No. I am too soon."

"We will walk slowly over the bridge, then, if you don't mind."

"Ah, yes, and you can tell me what is the matter as we go along," said Victor, "and in what way I can help you; for in any way, and under any circumstances, you know I will help."

James Strahan glanced quickly at his brother, and with a sternness which was of the old times perhaps, and which resented very quickly any attempt to deceive him systematically.

"I have come to help *you*—if I can," he answered.

"But, my dear James, I don't want any help. I am in prosperous circumstances: I have had a rise in office even since we met last; I should not be very much surprised if at any moment Mr. Bocker took me into partnership," he cried; "and so all's well with me."

"I should not be very much surprised if Mr. Bocker put you into prison, Victor," said his brother, gloomily.

"What—what can you possibly mean?" exclaimed his brother; then he turned pale once more, and added—"There is no occasion for you and me to shout at each other in the street, is there?"

"No."

"Well then—what is the matter, Jamie? What do you mean?" he asked again, and in a lower voice.

"I have come to hear your story, not to tell you mine," answered James Strahan, "and then to offer you, my brother, all the help that lies in my power. And it may be more than you think."

"I don't understand," muttered Victor Strahan; "I am—in the clouds—completely."

"I don't think you are," was the reply.

"I assure you I am," asseverated Victor.

"You are stubborn, and not likely to tell me much," said the elder brother; "but you are Sissie Eston's promised husband, and I would save her from the truth, if there were no other reason to bring me to your rescue. Now, will you tell me all about it?"

"About what?"

James Strahan lowered his voice still more.

"About your making use of Mr. Bocker's money."

They were proceeding over London Bridge now, with the murmur of the mighty crowd of citizens in their ears, with a whole world of people hurrying to and fro, and taking no heed of these two units in the stream. They were more completely alone, perhaps, than on a mountain-top, where the echoes of their voices might have betrayed them to the peaceful dwellers in the valley beneath. There was no one to care for, or to listen to what these two might say.

Victor did not reply. He walked on, looking straight ahead ; but the face betrayed him, with its pain and trouble, at last. A good actor was Victor Strahan, but he was hardly perfect in his part.

"A man named Wenny—a late clerk in your firm—called last night at my house for the hush-money which you have been in the habit of giving him," James continued. "He was maudlin, and fretful, and weak—and half drunk."

"I know him."

"Am I to believe what he told me?"

"No, no," said Victor, "certainly not. God knows, Jamie, I have not had a thought of making use of Mr. Bocker's money to my own advantage. Do you think so badly of me as that—you?"

"I don't quite know what to think," said James

Strahan, moodily. "Why is this man paid for his silence?"

"Because he can ruin me by a word," answered Victor. "Because people would not believe what I want you to believe. I have met a debt—a heavy debt—by borrowing a little money to add to all that I had saved up myself; but to-morrow or next day it will be all right again. Oh, Jamie, why did you not come to-morrow, when I could have said that I did not owe a penny in the world?"

"Then at present you do owe Mr. Bocker money? To-day, for instance?"

"Yes."

"And you *borrowed* that money without asking Mr. Bocker's consent?" asked James Strahan.

"It was not wanted. I have often done it. It was a floating capital under my complete control. Wenny knew when a large amount was gone, but he had really no right to interfere. Mr. Bocker and I balance the books in a few days. It is sure to be right then—quite right," cried the sanguine Victor.

"It is quite wrong," said James Strahan; "and I call it a theft, not a loan. In every sense of the word a robbery, Victor Strahan; and God forgive you for it!"

"Ah! I knew how you would look at this,"

said Victor ; " that is why I could never tell you a word."

" Have you told Sissie Eston ?"

" A woman knows nothing of business."

" Not such black business as this—and perhaps it was as wise not to tell her, and break her heart at once, poor girl ; for," he added, " she believes you all that is good."

" And I will be !" cried Victor. " God knows I haven't been happy in all the excitement and speculation of money getting. I shall be a different man in another week. Trust me."

" You must not wait for another week—for another day," said James Strahan, firmly. " You must turn back with me."

" Now ?"

" Yes, now."

" It is quite impossible. My engagement——"

" I have saved money—you must take it," said James Strahan.

Victor laughed.

" No, no, Jamie—not a penny of yours. It would be of no use."

" I have saved some three hundred and fifty pounds, and you must pay that in to-day to Mr. Bocker's account."

" It is of no use to me at all," was the reply.

" How much do you owe your employer, then ?"

"Seven thousand pounds," was the reply.

"Great Heaven! What have you done with the money?"

"Hush, hush—not so loud!" exclaimed his brother. "It was a debt of honour. I had been playing heavily at cards. I was reckless with the drink, and did not know what I was doing, and I lost it all—all, like the mad fool that I was!"

Always the drink! For ever the one excuse leading to all sin—the one Black Speck, growing swiftly to the awful density of the night, and overclouding the whole man into darkness. Always the awful soul-destroying drink, from which the nation will make no mighty effort yet to free itself and—save itself! And the cloud still gathers force and God's lightnings.

"But I am a changed man. I have learned my lesson," said Victor Strahan. "It will be all right to-morrow, I assure you."

To-morrow!

CHAPTER XXIV.

WAITING FOR THE MORROW.

VICTOR STRAHAN should have been a happy man, he believed so implicitly in the morrow. He was sure that the next day would make every difference in his fortunes, and that for ever afterwards there would be a brightness on his life which nothing could dim, not even the memory of his weakness in making use of his master's money.

"I tell you, Jemmy, it's all right," were his concluding words ; "I am as sure of it as that I am shaking you by the hand."

"I am glad to hear it," answered his brother, "but——"

"There, there, don't ask me any more questions," he cried ; "in twenty-four hours you shall know all. Trust me till then."

"Very well."

"And thank you, Jamie, for your interest in me again—for the offer to give up all your savings to me. As if," he added warmly, "I would have made you poor to save myself, under any circumstances."

"I should have been glad to save you had it been in my power," said James Strahan, thoughtfully.

"Yes, yes—thanks again. But I have only been a fool, not a knave. The money will be forthcoming to the day and hour and minute of settling with Mr. Bocker," he said. "On my solemn word it will, Jamie."

"When shall I see you to-morrow?"

"In the evening."

"Where?"

"I will call for you at home."

James Strahan considered this for a few moments, then he said—

"Would you mind meeting me at the Coffee Palace with Sissie?"

"Not at all, if you prefer it."

"I was hard with you then, and I said things I did not quite mean. And," he added, "Sissie will be glad to see we are friends."

"I will be there at eight. Sissie," he said, "of course, knows nothing of this. She is a girl whom I have never troubled with business matters, you know."

"Yes, I know," replied James Strahan, thoughtfully.

"Till to-morrow then. *Au revoir.*"

Victor hastened away. He was glad to be free

of this terrible brother, who would not look at things in the same light as himself, and who was trying very hard nevertheless to believe in him and the purity of his motives. As if he would have borrowed a penny of anybody's money, or taken a fraction from the firm's account, had he not been sure that it was only a temporary convenience to himself which did no one any harm, and for which his conscience did not in any way accuse him! Certainly there was an elasticity about this particular conscience which came in very handy to a man who had faith in the to-morrow. Sufficient for the day was the evil thereof; he had had his trials and troubles, but he had never been in the habit of meeting them half-way, and he had lived many of them down. And to-morrow, thank Heaven, would wholly change the condition of things and make a man of him, and show to the world, after all, what a generous, warm-hearted, unselfish being he was. Perhaps the world hardly understood him just yet; it had a bad habit of showing up the shortcomings of those weaklings which form part of it, Victor considered, and of falsely interpreting their words and deeds very often, and it had, surely, "Such a tongue to blare its own interpretation."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE OLD SWEETHEARTS.

JAMES STRAHAN was at the Coffee Palace by half-past seven the following evening. He was anxious and unsettled—for the first time in his life, perhaps, absolutely nervous. He had been fidgety, and then absent-minded, at the docks; there was the spirit of unrest about him which it was difficult to quell. In his early dinner hour he read the morning papers, eagerly searching, as it were, for bad news, which seemed to be foreshadowed as clearly to his mind as though he were a victim to superstition and forebodings, and had never laughed scornfully at both of them. But it was a matter of fact, every-day commonplace newspaper, containing only a very brief record of calamity that morning. Certainly, a man had kicked his wife to death because she had reproved him for drinking up his week's wages, and leaving her to starve; but that was the old story—drink! A poor crazy fellow had hanged himself in a police-cell,—all the drink! A drunken woman had dropped her baby out of

window, and a shopkeeper, for ever drunk of late days, had set his house on fire, and was very much under suspicion of arson in consequence ; but these were the ordinary day's doings of the drink-devil, and there was nothing new about them. A lighter charge-sheet than usual of human crime, people having been merrily drunk yesterday, with occasional intervals of fighting and blaspheming by way of striking contrast. It had been the Epsom Spring Meeting, and there had been some excellent racing, the reporters said, and it had been most fully described by them in large type, and was to James Strahan the most wearisome reading that he had ever come across. But there was no big and startling news for *him*—and all was “quiet in the City,” he thanked Heaven.

He found Sissie in her old place in the little side room, through the windows of which one evening in the winter-time he had seen the hope of his life die out. She was very busy over her accounts in the same energetic way, but there was no Victor Strahan to counsel her. He was the figure missing from the picture. Perhaps she missed him, also, for it was a sad face, James thought, until it flushed and brightened with surprise at seeing him.

“You have come to see Victor,” she cried, impulsively, almost joyously,

"Yes, I have come to see Victor," answered James, as he shook hands with her, "but I am a little before time."

"He is seldom here till eight," said Sissie, "and—and you have come to make friends with him again? Say that——"

"I don't know that I have ever been his enemy, Sissie," said James Strahan, in reply.

"You said that—that you would never forgive him," she remarked, hesitatingly. "You have not met or exchanged a word since, I know, and you are always terribly firm."

"Terribly firm," he re-echoed; "that is a hard estimate of me."

"Pardon me," she said, earnestly, "I did not mean to pain you. I am foolish, and say things hastily. If I have offended you, I——"

"No, no," he cried, interrupting her; "don't think I am quick to take offence. I hope I am not, and I know you would not offend me by a word."

"You have come to forgive Victor?" she asked again.

"I have forgiven him long since—all that I had to forgive—I told him so yesterday," said James.

"Oh! I am very glad," cried Sissie, brushing away some tears with a hasty hand. "I shall be happy now,"

"That is well, then."

"It will make so great a difference in him, I am sure," she continued. "He has been very strange and dull of late days—so different from his old self, so excited, and even nervous."

"And did he say that I was the reason of it all?"

"Oh, no," she replied; "he will not own to being different in any way; but he has thought so much of you—he looks upon his present position in life as due to your care and control of him when he was young—he is never tired of speaking in your praise."

"Poor Vic."

"Why do you say poor Vic?" she asked wonderingly.

"I can hardly tell you," he replied, sorrowfully; "I do not deserve his good opinion."

"Why not?"

"I have looked after him so little of late days," he answered. "I have neglected my duty in letting him go his way, out of a silly pride that he had risen in the world so much above me that I was not fit for him and the friends he had made, and hence it was better to leave him to himself. When he wanted me I thought he knew where to find me—and so we drifted apart."

"But you told him when you were here last——"

"Oh, Sissie," he cried, "I am thinking of the year before that—of the time when neither he nor I knew that you were living. With you, afterwards, I had hoped he would alter his whole life, as he should have done."

"As he will now," said Sissie, confidently.

"God willing—yes," was the solemn answer.

"He is so thoroughly amiable a man," Sissie continued, in her lover's praise, "that with nothing on his mind to disturb him, he will become strong, self-reliant, happy, and, I am sure—forgive me again if I grieve you—that you have been on his mind a great deal."

"Not so much as you think," replied James Strahan.

"Was he not glad to see you yesterday—truly glad?"

"Yes ; I think he was."

"And grateful even?"

"Yes ; he expressed some gratitude, I believe. But I did not deserve that. I——has he been very strange of late days?" he inquired suddenly.

"Yes—at times."

"You are a true woman, for you stand between him and the one great cause of all this strangeness. You screen him."

"I."

"He drinks," said James Strahan, decisively, "and you know it."

"No, no," cried Sissie, "don't think that. You must not set him down in your estimation as a drunkard. It would be unjust."

"Very well," he responded, "I will not say another word."

"I have never seen him intoxicated in my life—or approaching in any way towards it," cried Sissie. "He has even talked of signing the pledge just to please you—just to show me that some of the old force of will is in him, as in you."

"Poor Vic."

"You must not speak of him in that way," she protested again, and with a greater warmth; "you freeze the blood in my veins by your strange manner. You seem to know more of him than I do—and to pity him as if, as if—great Heaven! as if he had done something wrong."

"I have not said so," cried James Strahan, alarmed now by her excitement; "you must not think so."

"But you do."

"I call drunkenness a deadly sin," replied the other, with an affected sternness which was successful in its object. It had been assumed in this instance to throw Sissie Eston off her guard; to divert her mind from Victor to himself; to show

to her again what a hard being he was, who would allow no virtue, or honour, or good feeling in an intemperate man, but condemned him utterly, and at once. He would proclaim it as a fact that Victor *was* a drunkard for all her assertion to the contrary.

"You will not believe me," she said pathetically; "not when I tell you that your brother does not drink, that I have never seen——"

James Strahan interrupted her quickly.

"Here he is," he remarked.

And Victor Strahan, somewhat flushed, and with an unsteady gait, came into the room the instant afterwards.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LUCKY MAN.

THE younger brother advanced with both hands extended, and oddly enough towards James Strahan, instead of his lady love. His voice was thick, but emotion had a great deal to do with that, and his eyes were very bright.

"Wish me joy, wish me joy ; you man of many doubts!" he cried with excitement, "for I deserve your congratulations at last. I am a free man. I have shaken off the burden of debt, the cursed incubus of the big loan. I am free, Jamie ! Don't you understand me ?"

"It has all come true, just as you prophesied?" said his brother, as he took his hands.

"Every word of it."

"You thank God for it then, as I do. I am intensely glad, but," releasing his grasp, "you need not have shown your exultation, your natural joy, by drinking, Vic."

"I am not drunk, old fellow," he said ; "I have been the host this evening at a champagne dinner, which I was compelled to give, which

my extraordinary good luck necessitated absolutely. I am naturally elated, but I have not been drinking deeply; far from that. Why, my hand is as steady as your own. See."

He held it out, but it trembled a little notwithstanding, although his brother made no comment.

"May I ask, Victor, what it all means?" asked Sissie, "for I am completely in the clouds; and that may be the reason," she added, with the old *naïveté* showing itself, "that I am invisible to your sight this evening."

"My dear Sissie, a thousand pardons," he said, turning to her, "I shall settle down in a minute. I shall be able to tell you everything as soon as I have got my breath; but I really am half wild with joy,—not with drink though, as this old suspicious fellow thinks."

"Wild with joy," repeated Sissie; "well, we are ready to share this joy with you. You have come to tell us the good news."

"I have come to tell you everything," he answered. "Ah! you may frown at me, Jamie; but I have no secrets from this dear girl—not one."

"You said yesterday——" began his brother

"Yes, I know; but I have thought it all over since, and I hate secrets. And you two understand me thoroughly, and after your respective fashions. Sissie has seen lately there has been a

little bit of mystery about me, and so," he added lightly, "we pull up the curtain, and explain the play. Presto."

James Strahan did not relish this flippant manner of description, and Sissie gazed critically at Victor. For an instant, it struck the elder brother even that an expression of pain passed for an instant across her face as she looked steadily at her lover, but this was fancy perhaps. Was he not always full of fancies?

"Three days ago, Sissie," he commenced, "I was a poor man—Jamie would even tell you I was on the verge of ruin, but I knew better all along. I was quite certain that to-day I should be a rich man, and I told him so only yesterday. And rich I am, a perfect Cræsus, by Jove!"

"Yes, yes; and how?" asked Sissie, anxiously. "Tell me please."

"Patience. Hurry no man's cattle," he said with great gravity; "I will proceed. A few months ago, before I knew you, Sissie, I was a foolish fellow, even a reckless, thoughtless idiot at times. There, I own it. I was a gambler. I own that, too, as I shall never touch a card again, never. I have learned my lesson by hard experience."

"That is well," said James Strahan.

"When I lost heavily, and occasionally I did lose heavily, I borrowed now and then from

my running account with Mr. Bocker, making it up always on settlement day, and knowing always I should be able to do so, or I should not have touched a penny. That," he said, "I swear. And *you*, Sissie, will not doubt me."

"But, this was not honest," exclaimed Sissie ; "I know nothing of *your* business affairs, but I see this was not an honest act."

Victor was astonished at the protest, but he hastened to say—

"Well, I see what objections can be urged against it now very clearly. It has been on my conscience ; but it has saved me from ruin more than once."

"Better the ruin," muttered James.

"No, I don't go so far as that," said Victor, "but I will never touch a penny again that is not rightly and lawfully my own, however certain it may be that I shall be able to replace it. That I swear, too."

"Good," responded the deep voice of his brother.

"I pay back to-morrow morning six thousand pounds to the credit of Mr. Bocker. I have sent that cad of a clerk five hundred to get out of the country, and not worry me any more with his exaggerated notions of what I have done, or what can be done to me. I shall have a clean two thousand pounds in hand, and by next week, or

the week after at the latest, I shall have all my debts in and be worth two-and-twenty thousand pounds. See there. And now, old Jamie," he said, turning to his brother, "who came to me with his honest soul disturbed on my account, and would have saved me, if he could, with all the hard earnings of his life, you must let me brighten that life a little, and set you independent of the world. I wish it ; I shall not be happy without you share my prosperity—I really shall not, Jamie."

"I cannot take anything from you," answered his brother, gloomily.

"Oh ! but you shall."

"And how was this money made so quickly ?" asked Sissie, turning pale.

"By a lucky speculation on the turf. But that you would not understand, my dear. I knew what horse would win the race, and I backed it heavily," Victor said.

"But if it had lost ?"

"Oh ! it was a certainty it should win," he cried, laughing at the anxiety in that respect.

"Why was it a certainty ?" asked his brother, with his old sternness visible once more.

"I had the 'tip' from the right man, of course. These things are often known beforehand—are always known, you may say, as a rule."

"Ah ! I see," said James Strahan, "and having

the 'tip' as you call it, you betted with men who were confident the horse would lose the race. You took the odds against it."

"That's it, old man. You understand I see. Ha, ha!—you are not as innocent as——"

"And the odds were heavy?" interrupted our hero.

"Yes."

"And you took them of men with some faith in the honesty of horse-racing; or, in your honesty perhaps. I wonder how many fools have been ruined to-day by the knaves," said James Strahan.

"Oh! come; that is not the way to look at it."

"I look at it as a dead robbery, Victor, like cheating at cards, or betting that the ace will turn up when the ace is marked under your hand. I think out of the number of your sins, the lightest was taking your master's money, after all. Why didn't you stick to that?"

"What—what do you say?" cried Victor, his eyes blazing with sudden fire.

"I say you're a thief," thundered his brother, "and I will hold no further talk with you. I have surely done with you now."

And James Strahan rose and walked quickly out of the house. Victor shrugged his shoulders, and then broke into a loud laugh.

"That's like him. There he goes again with

his absurd notions of right and wrong. He'll never be worth a penny, the fool."

"Victor—Victor!"

"Hollo! what is the matter with you, Sissie?"

"Don't say that of a man who loves truth and honour better than you do," she said, "and who is your own brother."

"You think he is in the right then?" asked her lover.

"I will tell you what I think," said Sissie Eston, "and you will bear with me, I am sure."

"Go on," he said, "I can bear anything from you."

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONGRATULATIONS.

MAN and maiden betrothed to each other, and with hearts full of love for each other, looked steadily before them. In each face was a new and grave solemnity, born of the shadows deepening about their lives.

"I do not think you have acted like an honest man, Victor," Sissie began; "and I do not see before you—say before us both, if you like—the brightness of the future you have talked about."

"Ah! you take your tone from James," he cried.

"No. I wish he had not come to-night," answered Sissie, "and that you had only told me of this awful weakness—this crime."

"There was no crime in it," said Victor. "When a man borrows money and is sure of paying it back again, where is the sin?"

"The permission to borrow was not asked; the money paid back was got by fraud, the—but there, there, I will not argue with you, Victor."

"Thank you, very much," he said, ironically, "but what will you do?"

"I will pray for you."

The mocking smile deserted his face, which became suddenly very grave.

"Do you think me so great a sinner then?"

"Yes."

"And you hate me now."

"No, I am a woman, and will love you to the end. I can't help it, Victor, but I pity you so much. I grieve for you so deeply—you have broken my heart!"

She spread her hands before her face, and he, always impulsive and sympathetic, was at her side on the instant, endeavouring to draw them away.

"There, there, I know I haven't acted quite on the square, Sissie; but I will amend. The future is bright, and I was dragged down in the past. Trust me," he said.

"I will try to trust you—presently."

"It was all through the drink—it began with the drink," he confessed—"but it shall not happen again; see if it shall!"

"But—this dreadful money?"

"Oh! that was fair enough. Everybody had his tip, but mine happened to be the correct one. I am sure Jamie does not look at the matter in the right light," he cried.

"Yes—he does."

"Sissie, you take his part against me. You grievously offend me," he cried.

"I cannot help it."

"Shall I pitch the money into the street?—if I don't make Bocker's account good, I shall be in prison before the week is out. Do you ask me to do that?" he cried.

"Let me think. Pray leave me now."

"Oh! I don't wish to stop, if you want to get rid of me," he said, "and I will not be lectured any more. So, good-night."

"Good-night," she whispered back.

He stooped and kissed her forehead, sign that there was no deep enmity in his heart against her; sign that he believed in her, and feared what she might say to him, and then he passed out into the street. An old woman, ragged and half distraught, was waiting for him there—the same grim solemn Chorus to this tragedy.

"Dinah," he said, "get out my way. You are always about here."

"Like yer evil genus, Mister Victor," she said; "but yer'll be good to me now yer've got rich. Won't yer now?"

"Who told you I was rich?"

"They've been a talkin' on it in the Korfee Pallis," replied Dinah, "yer must have screeched out pretty loud, the lot on yer, for that. In yer

cups, I spose — only they're Korfee cups, o' course!"

Victor shivered.

"But I am glad ye're lucky. I wish yer joy. I do—upon my soul and body, I do!" she cried.

"Thank you. You are the first that has wished me joy, old woman," he said.

"Bless me, yer don't say so? But then I am an old friend of the family," she whined. "I nussed yer when yer was a babby, and yer mother was too drunk to hold yer, and kep' droppin' yer into the fender. I remember once——"

"Remember nothing about me. There is money for you to forget—go and drink yourself to death with it, old lady," he said, with his loud forced laugh again.

"Well," was the callous answer, "there's a many was death than that, ain't there?"

There was a Hansom cab passing, and Victor hailed it. When it had stopped, and he had entered it, Dinah gave him her blessing, and wished him a continuance of his good luck, and it was this mad face which seemed to loom upon him all the way to his club, to be before him like a spectre there, or a hideous dream-face there was no escaping, and it was her voice which rang in his ears many times that memorable night.

This was all his reward at present. The scorn

of his brother, "the pity of it" from Sissie Eston, and only the congratulations of this drink-witch, to set against it all. He was not happy in his mind yet—let him forget it all for a while in the society of men who understood him, and liked him, and knew what a good fellow he really was at heart.

And to-morrow the new life.

Ah! always the to-morrow, for men like Victor Strahan—men with the Black Speck at their heart's core.

And "the morrow never comes." NEVER!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

REPROACHES.

VICTOR STRAHAN was a member of the "Green Baize Club"—a club famous for its sporting proclivities, its "life," its heavy betting, its colossal sweepstakes, its high card-play, and the free-and-easy manners of its members. It was essentially a club which went in for horse-racing, and opened its doors to horsey folk, hence the company was mixed, from the back-boneless patrician, with his open mouth and vacant stare, to the lynx-eyed book-maker, scheming hard to live on other people's money.

As Victor entered the club, he became conscious of a general air of extra excitement about the establishment; members were more than ordinarily restless, and there was much running up and down stairs, and flitting about the passages. There were little groups of men in the hall, talking and gesticulating; the roar of angry voices in the smoke-room was heard through the open windows by passers-by in the street; the players in the card-room were not so absorbed

as was their wont, and the men at billiards left off their game to talk and argue, to dash their cues upon the floor, and swear profanely, and with an easy fluency born of constant practice.

The genius of *Discordia* was hovering over the club with big, broad wings, and there were the elements of danger in the place. Much cash had been lost and won yesterday at the Spring Meeting, and many doubts as to the way of winning it were now abroad, and circulating rapidly at all clubs where money had been staked—particularly at this establishment, where money-hunting under doubtful circumstances was the sole aim and business of the majority of its members.

“Here’s Strahan,” cried more than one voice as Victor stepped into the club. “Here’s another of them.”

“Here is the worst of them,” growled others.

“What is the matter?” asked Victor, as men closed round him very quickly and excited, half-mad faces glared into his own.

“The matter is you’ve ruined me,” said a very young man, one of the most excited of the group; “and it was all a swindle from beginning to end; an accursed fraud, between blacklegs and jockeys. The race was sold, it was all arranged beforehand; your horse could not have won if the rest had not let it win, and you were in with the

jockeys. Say you were not, if you dare! I know better. I have proofs. I have proofs!"

Victor Strahan was cool in the midst of this turmoil; here he had his character to maintain also, although, for the opinions of these men, he did not care a great deal. They would have robbed him at any time; they had robbed him at many periods of his career; they had dragged him down to ruin; they had made him what he was. It was only their turn to be served out by the black laws regulating knavery in general.

"I don't know what you mean, Grainger," he replied; "I backed what I thought was the best horse, and I won."

"You knew it was arranged to win."

"Nonsense," said Victor.

"I say you did, and so does the jockey who rode the beast."

"He is a liar then," said Victor.

"So are you."

Victor lost his temper, and struck out with his fist, but the man jumped aside, and then rushed back at him. A few blows were interchanged before the members separated them, and hustled them apart from each other, Victor finding himself a few dreamy moments afterwards sitting in the card-room, with a sympathetic and honest friend reinstating his diamond breast-pin in his scarf.

"What is it all about? Who has spread this absurd report, Levy?" asked Victor.

Levy shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know, Vic. It's deuced awkward. It's deuced hard," he said, with great animation; "it will clean settle me if the bets are off."

"If the bets are off!" repeated Victor. "Surely that can't be."

"They're talking of it everywhere—there's to be an inquiry, and Bob Wisp is saying anything. A nice jockey he is!"

"Is he?"

Victor Strahan sat and looked helplessly before him. It was like a dream now; the place was full of mist, and the card-players were receding in it and becoming lost to his view; the haggard face of Dinah was glaring at him again, and with a more solemn and threatening aspect, like one of the Fates which he had defied so long.

Some one was holding a glass to his lips the instant afterwards.

"Here, drink this, old man. You'll faint clean off, if you don't," said Levy; "you're looking queer."

"Where's Jamie?"

"What!"

"Oh! I don't know what I am saying," cried Victor, making a sudden effort at self-command; "I shall be better in a minute."

He drank off the contents of the glass.

"That's strong," he said, the instant afterwards.

"I made it strong on purpose. It will do you good."

"Thank you, Levy. Yes, I am better now."

Mr. Levy sat beside him on the couch ; never was a more sympathetic and attentive friend, despite a most diabolic expression of countenance which surely was a libel on its possessor.

"I thought you would be."

"Bets are likely to be off, did you say?" Victor inquired once more.

"There will be an inquiry, that's certain. But a heap of fellows paid you yesterday ; it was regular sudden death."

"Sudden death—ah ! yes."

Mr. Levy looked at his companion, who was moodily regarding the carpet at his feet, and did not appear to be quite conscious even yet of the nature of his replies. He reached his hand out for the empty glass, which Mr. Levy very adroitly replaced by his own full tumbler.

"I am all right now," said Victor, after this second draught ; "I'm famous."

"That's right."

"I shall go down and trounce that cad who——"

But Mr. Levy pushed him gently back into the seat from which he had half-risen.

"Nonsense. He has gone. I saw them pack him into a Hansom. He was awfully drunk, Vic."

"The filthy beast," said Vic, "I thought something was the matter with him."

"Come and join us at Unlimited Loo," cried a voice from the card-table.

"I am always unlucky at Unlimited Loo," Victor answered.

"Ah! but Fortune smiles on you, and this is a lucky week for Victor Strahan," cried Levy, patting his friend on the back. "I'll join if you will."

"Anything you like."

Victor rose and went to the card-table, where he paused with his hand on the back of his chair.

"Didn't I promise somebody I would never touch a card again?" he asked of the players, who all burst into laughter at the half-vacant question, although the sadness in his face was painful for an honest man to witness at that hour.

"Sit down—sit down."

"What is the loo this time?" he asked, sitting down as requested.

"A hundred pounds."

"That's high. How is it that——"

"What is a hundred pounds to you, even if you lose? Haven't you made thousands—hundreds of thousands—to-day, you miser," cried one of the players.

"Ah! if the bets are not off," cried another, who had not won money, and was unhappy and morbid.

Victor took up his cards and played; the new resolutions had vanished, the old bad course of life was once again resumed, the Black Speck was at last the Black Cloud, and the end of it all was very close at hand.

* * * * *

Four hours afterwards there was placed in a Hansom cab a helpless, half-mad, and drunken man, who was protesting, raving, even weeping; who fought with the porters who pushed him into the vehicle, who leaned out and cursed his friends at parting as they stood on the steps laughing at his anathemas; who raved on long after the cab had driven away, and there were only the rain and wind and darkness to curse.

He had lost all his money, all his senses, all his chances of a better life. And there was no to-morrow for Victor Strahan.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HURRIED BALEFULLY INTO NIGHT.

It was twelve in the morning of the day following Victor's announcement of good luck, that Sissie Eston was apprised by her handmaiden Polly of a visitor below stairs. She had been writing in her room a long letter to Victor, in the fear that she might not see him for a few days, and in the hope that some small words of hers, faithfully rendered from the heart, might turn the scale in his favour and for his good, love being stronger than all reasoning at times. But the scales had already turned and the balance been struck—as she came downstairs she read something of the truth in James Strahan's mournful face. Once before he had looked like that, and told his story like that—and he had been the messenger of a brother's death at that time. What was this?

"Victor! you have come with bad news of him," she cried at once. "He—he is arrested?"

"No, Sissie."

"He is—oh! not dead," she screamed; "it

shan't be—it can't be—you will not tell me that!"

"He has destroyed himself by his own hand," responded James Strahan. "They found him dead in his room half an hour ago. They have sent for me."

"And you came here with the news. You are always the bearer of awful trouble to me," said Sissie, sinking into a chair, "and this is the worst of all."

"Yes, the very worst."

He accepted her reproach—he made no defence—he was wholly cast down, for this had been a brother whom he had loved. He had not broken the news gently to her, as when he had come from London to Devonshire with the tidings of another victim to drink. His heart was too full to spare her or himself, though he did not know till afterwards how crudely he had broken the grim facts to her.

"Take me to him. Do me this one kind office, if you can be ever kind," she cried half wildly, and half ungratefully. "Oh! my lost Victor, this, then, is the bitter end of it."

Poor Sissie, robbed thus suddenly of her love, could only be unjust, only add by her words to the misery of the man who had been her faithful friend, but who was not hurt in any way. This was not

the real Sissie Eston he knew, only a poor, weak woman whom a sudden calamity had rendered distraught.

They went away together—two grave, beclouded figures, from whom the light was shut out. They thought it would be for ever; but there was peace to come in its good time, ay, and even happiness to these two. On the steps of the house wherein Victor had been lodging were an old man and a sharp-featured young one, both strangers to James Strahan and his companion.

The old man was agitated, and at first glance of our hero came towards him.

"Are you his brother?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My name is Bocker. You have heard of it, of course?"

"Yes."

"Your brother occupied, of late days, in my firm an important position, which we find he has terribly abused—which this very day we should have resented by his summary arrest. But—he has forestalled us, and the disgrace of it. It is as well he is dead, for his own sake."

"It is as well," echoed James Strahan, "being God's will."

"Ah! yes. Poor fellow, poor fellow," said the old man, suddenly relenting; "I was very fond of

Victor once—but he took to drinking and gambling, and he ends all by——”

James Strahan touched his arm, and he was silent.

“The lady who was to have been his wife, sir,” said James, in a low tone. “You will spare her now, will you not? She loved him very much.”

Mr. Bocker looked at Sissie, raised his hat, and went away followed by the detective, who had arrived too late for his prisoner.

“Yes—it may be as well,” said James Strahan, looking down a few minutes later at the dead, calm face of his brother, “and may God forgive you the rash act, poor Vic.”

“May God forgive us all,” whispered Sissie.

“Amen,” responded the deep voice at her side.

The landlady of the house was in the room, and took James Strahan aside a few minutes afterwards.

“I found this paper on the mantelshelf—I think he must have written it the very last thing, sir,” she said.

James Strahan took the paper, and read the one blurred line scrawled on it by the hand which had turned rashly against itself. There was no address—but he knew for whom it was intended.

“All the drink! Take care of poor Sissie.”

Two years afterwards, for the first time, he

showed Sissie Eston this letter—and she read it through her tears.

James Strahan's father was dead then, and these two were quite alone in the world. On the distant sky-line the sun was rising, and their world beyond was brightened by its rays—beyond where their paths in life converged and met at last, and they went on together hand in hand peacefully to the end of their days.

FINIS.

*In October will be published the Eighteenth
Volume of*

THE BRITISH WORKWOMAN.

Price 1s. 6d., Picture boards ; cloth, gilt edges,
2s. 6d.

*With Twenty-five Illustrations by the first
Artists of the day.*

OPINIONS OF THE PRESS.

"Among the more thoughtful publications issued, the **BRITISH WORKWOMAN** deservedly demands a large share of public favour. Pure in tone and excellent in purpose throughout."—*Lloyd's News*.

"A publication that consistently keeps in view the object of providing instructive and religious reading in an entertaining form."—*News of the World*.

"This excellent periodical is full of bright and attractive reading."—*The Rock*.

"Admirably conducted, and deserves the attention of philanthropic agencies."—*Christian Globe*.

"It should be found in hundreds of thousands of homes."—*Christian World*.

"To those who are interested in the working classes we say, 'You cannot do better than circulate this paper freely.'"—*Fountain*.

"Everything possible is done to purify the minds and brighten the hopes of its readers."—*Daily Chronicle*.

"The matter is of a wholesome and interesting character."—*Temperance Record*.

"Commendable as ever. Attractive stories and well drawn pictures."—*City Press*.

"Well printed, pictorially illustrated, and will be read with pleasure and interest."—*Sunday School Teacher's Magazine*.

"The engravings are of a superior class, they appeal to the sympathies of the heart, through the eye, whilst the letterpress is of so general and elevating a character, we cannot doubt it will become increasingly a favourite."—*Wesleyan Times*.

"The parts of this serial form a complete gallery of fine wood-cut engravings, the quality of which seems to be better than usual. It belongs to a class which is doing good work amongst the humbler orders, helping out the weeds of literature by sheer force of superior merit."—*The Bookseller*.

THE BRITISH WORKWOMAN.

*A Monthly Journal for every home, beautifully Illustrated
by first-rate Artists.*

PRICE ONE PENNY MONTHLY.

Yearly Volumes, handsome Picture Cover	- -	1s. 6d
" " Cloth, gilt edges	- - - -	2s. 6d.

With the October number, No. 217, commences a New Story, written expressly for The British Workwoman by

MRS. EMMA RAYMOND PITMAN,

*Author of "Heroines of the Mission Field," "Vestina's Martyrdom,"
"Margaret Moreyn's Cross," "Profit and Loss," &c. &c.*

R. WILLOUGHBY, 27, IVY LANE, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

THE CRYSTAL STORIES.

A New Series of Original Tales for Family Reading.

ILLUSTRATED.

"Our common prints would be of great use were they thus calculated to diffuse good sense through the bulk of the people, to clear up their understandings, animate their minds with virtue, dissipate the sorrows of a heavy heart, or unbend the mind from its more severe employments with innocent amusement."—ADDISON.

Each Number complete in itself. Price One Penny.

Each Part, consisting of Five Stories, by well known Authors. Price 6d.

ADDRESS.

The aim and object of this SERIES is to offer an effective contrast, by a high moral tone and pure teaching, to much of the cheap and sensational literature now circulating throughout the country under the name of NOVELLETES. The above series of complete stories is mainly contributed by writers of considerable eminence in their profession, whose interest has been aroused by our project, and whose connection with honest literary work may be taken as evidence of the character of our undertaking.

Though the violent school of literature is carefully avoided, and we do not seek to entrap our readers by rendering criminals heroic, or vice attractive; it is at least our earnest endeavour to INTEREST the English people, and to offer true pictures of English homes and hearts, and of those life-trials, temptations and victories, which make up the sum of human existence, and the recounting of which helps to point many a good moral and adorn many a well-told tale.

The hearty co-operation of all those interested in disseminating healthy literature amongst the masses is solicited for THE CRYSTAL STORIES. Religious Societies, Temperance Associations, School Unions, Clubs for Working Men and Women, Promoters of Mechanics' Institutes and Coffee Palaces may fearlessly give to our pages the widest circulation. Heads of families may confidently leave this series in the hands of their sons and daughters. THE CRYSTAL STORIES invariably consist of pure and wholesome reading, calculated, we trust, to appeal to all classes, to awaken the sympathies of all readers, and to inculcate a taste for the highest form of fiction, clearing away the weeds by sheer force of comparison, it is hoped, from the garden ground of our national literature.

List of Contributors to "The Crystal Stories."

Mrs. EMMA MARSHALL.

Mrs. E. R. PITMAN.

THOMAS FROST.

The Author of "IN KENT WITH CHARLES DICKENS."

The Author of "MRS. JERNINGHAM'S JOURNAL."

Miss JEAN MIDDLEMASS.

Miss GRACE STEBBING.

The Author of "FEMALE LIFE IN PRISON."

Miss SUSAN GREGG.

Author of "A TRAP TO CATCH A SUNBEAM" (Posthumous Work).

Miss C. H. M. BRIDGE.

Mrs. LYSAGHT.

Miss BETSEY HAMMON.

Miss LOUISA LANSFELDT.

Miss MAUDE JEANNE FRANC.

E. OSWALD.

The Author of "GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY."

And numerous other Popular Writers.

The following numbers have already appeared, and can be obtained at any bookseller's, price One Penny each.

No. 1. The Woman who Saved Him. By F. W. ROBINSON.

2. Heiress of Castle Russell. By GRACE STEBBING.

3. Rescued from Rome. By LESLIE LORTON.

4. Daisy March.

By Author of "Female Life in Prison."

5. Aaron's Harvest. By C. H. M. BRIDGE.

Or bound together in Wrapper, price 6d.

R. WILLOUGHBY, 27, IVY LANE, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

